# Growing Up in Manitoba

by

Harold Draper

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# 1924-1941

*Harold H. Draper*

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## A Man Should Go Back to His Roots

*Harold H. Draper*

Canadian Plains Research Center
University of Regina
1998

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# Chapter 1

## *"In the Begin With..."*

### Memory Banks

The information we accumulate throughout life is said to be stored in the form of DNA sequences in "the memory banks of the brain" (fomerly just "the brain"). Sequences stored early in life are said to be retrieved more readily than those stored later in life. This first in, first out perception of information storage and retrieval is consistent with the well-known capacity of elderly persons to recall things that happened fifty years ago, but not what they had for breakfast on the current day.

The fact that most people can't recall things that happened during the first four years of life indicates that the memory banks don't open until the age of five. Notwithstanding, child psychologists have determined that we become aware of our own existence at about one year of age. For example, when children see their images in a mirror during the first year of life they think they are looking at somebody else, whom they may try to touch or find behind the mirror, whereas after that age they realize they are looking at themselves. A study on the first year of a child's life led the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget (1896-1980) to conclude that it was "an abyss of mysteries." A further study led him to conclude that children undergo a "five-to-seven shift," in the course of which the brain begins what he described as "concrete operations."

My recollection of childhood events conforms with this timetable. The only things I can recall that *may* have happened before my fifth birthday are a few idiosyncratic, isolated events such as falling down the cellar steps. I can't recall, for example, ever going to town, though I must have been taken there on numerous occasions by my family, nor events that infect the memory of children at an early age, such as seeing their first train or getting their first candy from the store. My grandson, who has just turned four, has already learned a great many things (and will prove it at any opportunity) but evidently he is destined to forget them before he grows up. Much of the information deposited in our memory banks before the age of five seems to be consigned to temporary storage, like information saved by a computer but not deposited on the hard drive.

*The author wearing his patched overalls with breast pocket containing watch and silver chain.*

If for no other reason, the events we can recall from early childhood are valuable as clues to the things that impressed us enough at that age to be committed to memory. They also serve to document the gulf that exists between events that are important to children and those that are important to adults.

A major problem encountered in reconstructing the events of early childhood is the difficulty of distinguishing between memories based on personal experience and memories rooted in anecdotal accounts. This problem is aggravated by the fact that anecdotal information can elicit memories of actual events. A photograph of me taken sometime before the age of six, wearing patched overalls with a breast pocket containing a watch and a silver chain, elicits memories of my mother sewing the pocket on my overalls, our conspiracy to requisition my father's watch chain from his box of personal valuables, and the colour of my woolen hat (reddish brown). Were it not for the photograph the whole thing would be lost to memory. It is one of a large number of events that I can certify took place before the age of six because my sixth birthday coincided with our move to another farm.

**Some Early Bank Deposits**

For the first several years of my life I had the impression that my family consisted of my father and mother and an older brother, dressed in knickerbockers, long stockings and a peaked cap, who rode off to school every morning on a horse named Dick. Periodically a man and a woman would come to visit, stay a few days and then disappear. They seemed to be well acquainted with my parents and with each other but I had no idea who they were. That didn't concern me until the woman showed up one day with a girl obviously older than I was who kept referring to me as "uncle," a term I associated with adults.

Eventually I came to understand that the man and woman were an older brother and sister who had grown up and left home before I was born. My brother was a teacher, my sister a farm wife and the girl was her daughter. It would be several more years before I realized that I had been born into *de facto* grandchildhood. My mother was forty-seven at the time and my father fifty-five. That explained why they were less enthusiastic in their response to such propositions as playing ball, running races, hiking and sledding than the parents of other children my age.

Some grandparents are said to enjoy their grandchildren so much more than their children that they yearn for a direct route to grandparenthood. I have few complaints about the way I was brought up by my parents, but on the basis of my experience with direct grandchildhood I don't recommend it to anyone who has the choice of the conventional route.

The title phrase "In the Begin With..." was introduced into the language by a friend whose first tongue was not English. As the son of English parents, learning the language was an easier problem for me, but translating my father's archaic version of it into the modern idiom nevertheless presented a significant challenge. His vernacular included a literal use of the verb to be ("Who be you?"), a decadent version of its negative forms ("Bain't you goin' out?"), an assortment of archaic adjectives ("nit" for neither) and adverbs ("prenly" for later, "once now and again" for occasionally), various English equivalents of contemporary Canadian nouns ("highroad" for highway) and English inflections in their pronunciation ("*gar*age" for gar*age*). This version of English I heard at home caused some confusion when it came to learning the language at school, but it also stimulated an interest in its origin that has persisted to the present day.

### Bank Deposits Made By My Family

As a young man I traced the roots of my father's idiom to the vicinity of Sherfield in Hampshire, England, from which he emigrated to Canada in 1908 to escape the social class to which his speech and low birthright forever condemned him. Leaving behind my mother and two small children, he made his way to Lenore, a village located in southwestern Manitoba not far from where two cousins had established family farms. After working for the Canadian Pacific Railway for a year, he went back to England briefly, then returned to Lenore where he worked another year as a hired man for a local farmer. Subsequently he established a draying business in Lenore. My mother and their two children joined him in 1913. Following the birth of a second son in 1916 they moved onto the small quarter-section farm two miles west of town that was to become my birthplace. By that time it was 1924, twenty-three and twenty-one years, respectively, after the birth of my oldest brother and my sister and eight years after the birth of my other brother. I don't think my mother ever forgave her husband.

My father discharged the duties of provider and protector in accordance with the English patriarchal tradition. He was neither a tyrannical nor an indulgent father. He would rail at me about some indiscretion but he never punished me physically. He justified making me do something by saying that he had to do it when he was my age. If I ran out ahead of him as we were going on some sojourn together he would say "Stop behind, the way I had to!" A man generally regarded as the town humourist said that my father was the funniest man he ever met. I didn't have that impression of him, possibly because I was used to the archaic English expressions that were the main source of his humour in Canada. He would avoid a difficult question I put to him by saying "It all depends..." and leave it there, evidently in the belief that he had given an adequate answer. When he tired of my questions he would send me off on some futile errand such as looking for rabbit eggs in the fields.

My mother was kind to all manner of humans and animals. She grieved over the horse that developed a sore shoulder from an ill-fitting collar, the cow that had a difficult labour, the dog that got his ear chewed up in a fight. The most violence she could muster was to swat some of the flies that infested the house in summer. While she maintained a constant vigil over my welfare, she didn't go in for a lot of hugging and kissing. Sometimes, after I had stretched the limits of her patience, she would threaten to tell my father about my misdeeds when he came in from work, but she never did. Her best offer in exchange for ten minutes of silence was the top brick off the chimney. I never earned it.

I never met my grandparents, but I remember the day, when I was six, that my mother received a letter from England informing her of the death of her father. She had not seen him since she left Sherfield some twenty years earlier. His name was Daniel Friend and he was the last surviving member of his generation of the family. My only impression of him and my grandmother, Harriet, stems from a professional photograph of them taken with my aunts Elsie and Millie. My grandfather is shown in a classical pose, gazing serenely into the camera, one hand held behind his back and the other resting on the back of his wife's chair. My grandmother, dressed in a black gown, is looking into the camera with what could be described only with generosity as a haughty expression. Their daughters, wearing formal white summer dresses and looking very proper, are seated one on each side of their mother. All three women have their hands folded in their laps in exactly the same manner. A rose-covered English cottage provides the background and completes the scene. In real life they ran the pub in Sherfield.

I was to have only one personal contact with my three aunts on the Friend side of the family. I visited Aunt Millie at her cottage in Sherfield when I was in my thirties, at which time her primary concern was whether I was more like my mother or my father. I hadn't prepared an answer for this question because it had never occurred to me before, but it was important to the Friends. Obviously the Friends and the Drapers never got along. The exact reason was never divulged, but it clearly had to do with the English class consciousness, which could detect a social chasm between the status of the daughter of a pubmaster and the son of a farm labourer. Clearly, Aunt Millie and Aunt Elsie felt that their sister Alice had married beneath her station.

*Alice Mary Friend (the author's mother), photographed as a young woman in England, c. 1900.*

Aunt Elsie emigrated to Australia where she became a teacher in a girl's school. She made a visit to Canada when I was nine, no doubt made possible by her share of her father's estate. It was during the drought and Depression on the Prairies, not the best of times for a gentle English lady to visit a farm in Canada, nor was I at an age when growing boys are most endearing to their aunts. By the end of her visit she had concluded that both Canada and I were beyond redemption. In a letter she wrote to

*Daniel and Harriet Friend (the author's maternal grandparents), Aunt Elsie (left) and Aunt Millie (right). Photographed in England, c. 1900.*

my mother after she got home (and which I pilfered) she expressed her sisterly condolences for the fact that I took after my father and offered the hope that I "might turn out all right yet." Twenty years later, when she learned that I had been appointed to the faculty of a university, she evidently concluded that her hope had been realized and she wrote her first letter to me. It began with the salutation "Your Aunt Elsie is here!" I resented the fact that, as a teacher, she had condemned me to the wilderness at the age of nine, and I replied that, like most other first impressions, her first impression of me had been right. I never heard from her again.

Aunt Annie emigrated to Canada, married a bus driver and lived out the rest of her life in Vancouver. She was my first family correspondent. I wrote her letters that all began with "How are you? I am fine" and ended soon thereafter. Her replies weren't much longer. As a young adult, when I first met her I was impressed with how much she resembled my mother, but when I saw her some years later the similarity had disappeared. She lacked my mother's tolerance for people of all nationalities, races, colours, religions, ethnicities and political persuasions. She had just had a visitor from Australia and she took up most of our time together with a monologue on the vulgarity of Australians.

A male member of the Friend family, Uncle Nev, emigrated to Canada and settled in Saskatchewan He was a quintessential English gentleman (except for the money) and he made a point of distancing himself from the Drapers. Nevertheless, one winter he sent us a large box of frozen jackfish (northern pike) in the apparent belief that we were near starvation during the Depression. The fish didn't compare well with the prime rib roasts, sirloin steaks, pork loins and poultry we had consigned to an empty granary because they were worth next to nothing on the market. Some thirty years later my wife and I stopped at his house on a motor trip to Vancouver. We hurried to get there early in the long summer evening in northern Saskatchewan and made it by eight o'clock. He met us at the door with the greeting "Late for visiting, isn't it?" Needless to say, we didn't stay long.

From the foregoing contacts with the Friends I concluded that I had been born to the right one, but I still haven't found the answer to Aunt Millie's question as to whether I am more like my mother or my father.

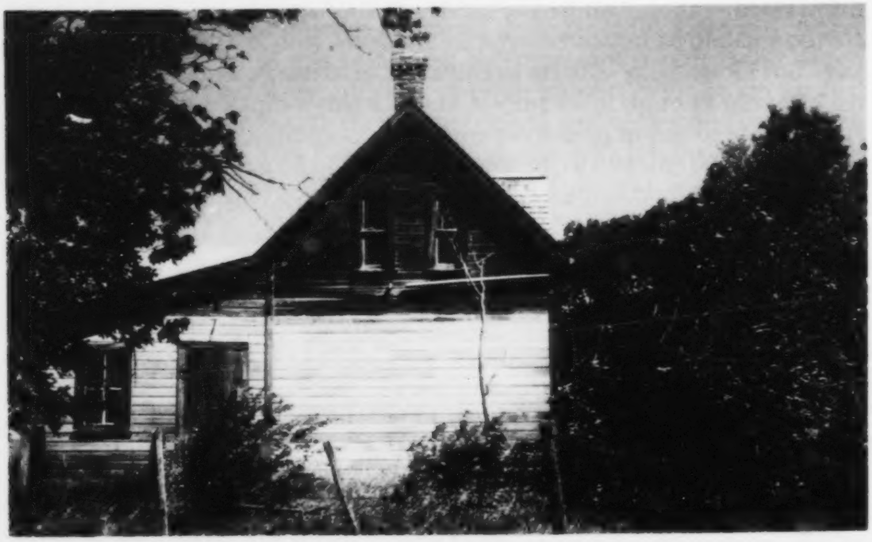
# Chapter 2

## *Our First Farmstead*

### First Impresssions

My perception of the world for the first five years of my life was confined to our farmyard and its immediate environs, the limit on my explorations imposed by my mother. By that time the scene had become firmly imprinted in my memory banks and is still readily retrievable today.

The yard was sheltered on the east by a row of box elders, on the north by a thin stand of poplars and on the south by a lilac hedge. There was a gate on the east side that opened onto the road and another on the west side through which farm implements and livestock were moved to and from the fields. Our unpainted gabled house consisted of a large farm kitchen, a dining-sitting room and one bedroom downstairs plus two bedrooms upstairs. There was a verandah at the back on which it was said that I would



*The family's first farmhouse and birthplace of the author. The less weathered lower section marks the previous location of a verandah. The house is now used as a granary.*

go and stand when I needed my pants changed. A trapdoor in the kitchen floor led to a dirt cellar where milk and cream were kept cool in summer and vegetables were kept from freezing in winter. My only clear recollections of the cellar are falling down the steps and suffering what may have been my first nosebleed and of stooping to pick up a potato in the dim light and putting my hand on a dead lizard instead. The house had no furnace, bathroom, toilet, running water, electricity, power washer, icebox, telephone or radio. The absence of these modern amenities had no particular significance for me because I didn't know that they existed elsewhere. I assumed, for example, that all children had to go to a little house in the corner of their yard occasionally, even in the dead of winter.

The stable was big enough to house the five horses needed to operate the farm machinery and the four cows needed to provide the family with milk, cream and butter. There was room for two or three fattening cattle, a couple of dozen chickens and a pony, but not enough to house pigs or cattle in the numbers necessary to sustain a livestock enterprise. It was a stable designed for subsistence farming, the only type of farming endeavour possible on a quarter section of alkaline land.

## Scenes of Summer

Myriads of prairie wildflowers grew along the moist banks of the slough just north of the farmyard, chocolate-coloured cattails grew along its edge and a dome-shaped muskrat house emerged from the water a safe distance from the shore. One day I found its occupant sunning himself against the west side of the house and rushed inside to tell my mother. She was unimpressed. I didn't know the names of the wildflowers, most of which were too small to be noticed except by children, who are interested in small things, but I found one of them so elegant that its image stuck in my memory until I was old enough to identify it. It was a lady's slipper, a prairie orchid featuring a deep yellow pouch covered with chocolate-coloured spots. Some fifty years later I returned to the same spot and found one still growing there.

The slough was frequented by ducks (teals, pintails, canvasbacks and mallards) and by coots, snipes, grebes and smaller water birds. I would lie hidden in the willows along the shore and watch the ducks as they swam past a few feet away. I noticed that they swam in formation and that the same ones were always in the lead. Eventually my presence would be discovered by one of the red-winged blackbirds that nested in the willows along the shore, and what is described by Roger Tory Peterson in his *Field Guide to the Birds* as their "liquid gurgling" would give way to an excited "check, check."

When not exploring my natural environment I took up such alternative activities as chasing the chickens. They would split into two groups, one going around each end of the stable to what they apparently believed to be security behind. I had a collaborator in the family dog, which chased some of them around one end while I chased the rest around the other end. They would meet at the back in a cloud of feathers and a cacophony of squawks. Sometimes my mother would hear the noise in the house and threaten to tell my father about it when he came in from the fields, but he didn't find the chickens' problems a serious rival to those he had encountered in the course of a hard day's work. Besides, he had trouble apportioning the blame between me and the dog, which sometimes relieved his boredom by chasing the chickens on his own.

Most of my toys were homemade: a whistle hewn from the branch of a willow; a slingshot constructed from a tree crotch and a rubber band cut from an old inner tube; a wooden rifle fitted with a rubber band that could propel an arrow across the yard; items scavenged from the farmstead such as the coloured ivory rings used to decorate horses' harness (also used by infants as "teething rings"); ball bearings recovered from abandoned machinery and used in place of marbles. I had few toys of commercial origin and no reason to covet them.

## Features of Fall

Ducks gathered in clouds to feed on the ripened barley growing around potholes in my father's fields. To protect his crop, he obtained permission to shoot them ahead of the hunting season, and when this measure proved inadequate he invited townspeople to join in the shoot. He liked to tell a story about discharging both barrels of his 12-gauge shotgun into a flock of ducks as they rose from a pothole and finding ten dead birds in the surrounding grain. The rows of carcasses lined up on the kitchen table were not a totally welcome sight to my mother, who had to prepare them for dinner. My father and brother removed their outer feathers and innards, but the main problem was removing the pinfeathers imbedded deep in their skin. They had to be plucked out one by one. We had no means of preserving the carcasses, so they were cooked and consumed in a series of consecutive dinners. The flavour of wild ducks, which spend much of their time searching for food in the mud bottoms of sloughs, is not up to that of domestic grain-fed birds. Overall, the fall bounty of wild ducks was an example of what the French refer to as a bad gift.

I was too young to take an active role in the fall harvest but old enough to be conscripted into my first farm chores while it was in progress. These included gathering the eggs, fetching the milk cows from the pasture, taking lunch to my father and brother in the fields and running errands on behalf of my mother. She packed an extra lunch for me and eating it with the men gave me an early sense of my malehood. The importance of finishing the harvest as quickly as possible was reflected in the way the men watched the sky for impending rain clouds, the urgency with which they worked and the long hours they spent in the fields. As it still is today, the main concern of farmers lay with the weather.

After the harvest of 1929 my mother took me on my first train trip, a journey of some fifty miles, to visit my sister and her two children at Moore Park near Brandon. The train ran on Tuesdays and Fridays. Its first stop was at Kenton, where it was scheduled to stay for fifteen minutes. When I looked out the window I could see a grocery store a block away and my mother gave me a nickel to buy a chocolate bar. When I got to the store the proprietor was engaged in an animated conversation with a local farmer. It went on and on until the train's whistle announced its imminent departure, whereupon the storekeeper casually turned his attention to me. I was five minutes late getting back to the train, but the conductor, noting my absence, had held it up until I arrived. Nobody ever missed the train in Kenton.

Our stay at my sister's place could not have been eventful because I can't remember anything about it. However, I do recall my father telling people after we got back that, although I had insisted that the potato harvest be delayed until my return, I refused to pick any potatoes at my sister's place. As he hadn't taken the trip, I presume that he got this information from my mother.

## The Ways of Winter

For laundry purposes, blocks of snow were cut from the snowbank around the house and melted in a copper reservoir attached to the stove next to the firebox. Drinking water for livestock and household use was pumped by hand from a well in front of the stable. A layer of ice formed on the water trough during the night and had to be broken up in the morning. I showed up for this event because I liked to suck on the small chunks of ice left floating on the surface of the water. This scene always comes to mind when I see my grandchildren sucking on pieces of ice taken from the icemaker in the refrigerator. Licking cold objects on winter mornings could be dangerous. It took warm water from the kitchen kettle to get my tongue off the head of a hammer that had been left outside overnight. Removing the manure that accumulated in the stable during the night was another morning ritual. My father always commented on the amount of excrement produced by a large gelding named King. It may be how he got his name.

Poplar trees cut from local bluffs were the main source of household heat. The trees were felled and stripped of their branches using an ax, cut into blocks with a bucksaw and then split into pieces that would fit into the kitchen stove. It was a dangerous and labourious process and I wasn't allowed to participate in it except as an observer. Before we went to bed the stove was banked with "Souris coal," a low-grade fuel that failed to last through the long winter night. The only source of heat upstairs was a stovepipe that ran through one of the bedrooms; by morning the temperature was often below freezing.

Household chores were performed after dark by the feeble light of kerosene table lamps. The livestock were bedded down for the night by the even dimmer light of kerosene lanterns. Removing the carbon that accumulated on the inside of the glass chimneys with crumpled newspaper was one of my first routine tasks. Lighting our first kerosene Coleman lamp was an event impressionable enough to have survived in my memory ever since. It revealed the location of several items I had lost in the kitchen as well as a lot of dirt in the corners.

On winter evenings my father sat on one side of the stove reading the *Winnipeg Free Press Prairie Farmer* while my mother sat on the other side mending socks and other items of family clothing. I sat on a thick rug made of pieces of discarded clothing, mostly socks beyond repair, that were braided together to make a cover for the frigid linoleum floor. To me the evenings were monotonous and boring, the worst time of the day, but for my parents they were the most relaxing and enjoyable. It was the beginning of the generation gap. The dog, which was banished to the outdoors during the day, even in cold weather, was allowed to lie beside the woodbox behind the stove in the evening. Curiously, my recollection of those winter evenings fails to account for the presence of my brother, who may have taken refuge from his boredom in town. At nine o'clock I was dispatched to the upstairs bedroom assigned to me because it was the one the stovepipe passed through on its way to the chimney.

Children were not encouraged to read before starting school, but sometimes I tried to convince my parents that I had learned on my own. I recall spending one long winter evening poring over a book kept on the bookshelf in the living room. It was a tome I later found was titled *Battles of the Nineteenth Century*. The only part of it I remember is a photograph depicting the stylish uniforms worn by Napoleon's soldiers at the battle of Austerlitz.

There was no place to use skates (besides, they were too expensive) but there was a small hill in the corner of the farmyard that I rode down on a sled and a pair of four-foot skis. My brother fashioned a harness that he used to hitch the dog to the sled and he would dispatch him, with me aboard, to fetch the cows feeding at the strawstack in the pasture. This adventure usually ended with my falling off the sled as it passed over the mounds of loose straw around the stack.

I spent a lot of time exploring the trees and bushes around the farmyard. Rabbits came in to the stacks looking for food during the night and I collected their round, frozen droppings as substitutes for marbles. The trouble was that there was no place to play marbles outside in winter and when I took them inside they thawed out and my mother insisted that I throw them outside again.

A small "boughten toy" usually showed up in my stocking on Christmas morning along with some woolen mittens and socks, an orange and the traditional English lump of coal to remind me of my misdemeanors during the year. The toy was generally of Japanese manufacture, which in those days was identified with poor quality and limited life expectancy. One Christmas I got an airplane that was supposed to fly in a circle when suspended on a string from the ceiling. Before I got a chance to use it my brother broke the spring as he was showing me how to wind it up. That's the kind of event that gets deposited in your memory banks before the age of six.

### Events Not Recorded in My Memory Banks

Many of the events I found too mundane to be remembered were indelibly recorded in the memory of my parents. I was oblivious to most of the problems that consumed their thoughts and energy: the constant drudgery of subsistence farming; the lack of sanitary facilities now available to the poorest of the poor; the necessity to launder and mend clothes without a washing or sewing machine; the challenge of raising a child without prepared foods, disposable diapers or ready access to medical services; the trauma of spending the western Canadian winter in a house with no credible insulation or heating system and only linoleum on the floors; the social isolation of living in a community where the nearest neighbour was a mile away and the only form of communication was by a horse-drawn buggy or sleigh; and the necessity of coping with these problems at an age when many people nowadays are being offered early retirement.

### A Retrospectus

It is interesting to speculate from a vantage point near the end of one's life on how it was influenced by things that happened near its beginning. Considering my unusual "family dynamics" (the sociologists' current buzz term for the relationships among the members of a family) it isn't difficult, at least for me, to understand why I developed a communion with the flora and fauna in my environment in early childhood. I had no close siblings, there were no other children of my age who lived close enough to be socially accessible and my parents were too preoccupied with the imperatives of farming to have time for my childish interests. My only reliable companions were the living things in my natural environment.

In this connection, I found the following quotation from Robert Paul Smith's 1957 publication *"Where did you go?" "Out" "What did you do?" "Nothing"* to be noteworthy because it illustrates the natural dichotomy that exists between the interests of children and those of adults. It is a dichotomy that parents must come to understand if they are to understand their children.

> All of us, for a long time, spent a long time picking flowers. Catching tadpoles. Looking for arrowheads. Getting our feet wet. Playing with mud. And sand. And water. You understand, not doing anything. What there

> was to do with sand was to let it run through your fingers. What there was to do with mud was to pat it, and thrust in it, lift it up and throw it down.... My world, as a kid, was full of things that grownups didn't care about.

It also isn't difficult for me to understand why, as an adult, I am still content to spend a good deal of time alone in what is sometimes regarded as unsocial, if not antisocial, behaviour. One advantage of solitude is that it encourages independent thought and action. I can't recall ever having an original idea in a crowd. There are lots of other people's ideas to be had, but if you're looking for an original idea you have to find it by yourself. So I'm inclined to attribute to my cloistered childhood the fact that, while I enjoy the company of children, family and trusted associates, I don't aspire to an obituary that cites widespread bereavement on the part of "a host of friends."

It was comforting in this regard to read Robert Coles' introduction to the book by Gary Paul Stephen and Stephen Trimble entitled *The Geography of Childhood* (1994). The following quotation is attributed to a black girl who was being bused to a previously all-white school in Boston:

> I guess I'm doin' all right. I'm studyin', and, like the teacher says, it pays off. A lot of time, though, I wish I could walk out of that school and find myself a place where there are no whites, no black folk, no people of any kind! I mean, a place where I'd be able to sit still and get my head together; a place where I could walk and walk, and I'd be walking on grass, not cement with glass and garbage around, a place where there'd be the sky and the sun, and then the moon and all those stars. At night, sometimes, when I get to feeling real low, I'll climb up the stairs to our roof, and I'll look at the sky, and I'll say, hello there, you moon and all your babies — stars! I'm being silly, I know, but up there, I feel I can stop and think what is happening to me — it's the only place I can, the only place.

### The Fall of '29

For most people "the fall of '29" is a paradigm for the stock market crash that sent them into a decade of economic and spiritual despair. For me, it marked the end of that phase of life identified with early childhood and the beginning of the phase associated with growing up. In my case the boundary between these two phases was made memorable by my parents' decision to abandon the small farm on which I had spent the first five years of my life in favour of a larger acreage. It was one of those milestones in life, nowadays referred to as "pivotal events" or "defining moments," after which nothing was ever the same.

# Chapter 3

## *Our Second Farmstead*

### Moving

There is a lot more involved in moving to a new farm than in moving to a new house. We had to move not only all our personal and household belongings, but all the farm equipment and farm animals along with enough feed to sustain them until the next harvest. This process went on for weeks, at the end of which all our possessions had been paraded along the main street of town on route to our new destination a mile to the east. By the time it was over everybody knew what we owned.

It was spring breakup, the worst time of the year for road travel, neither winter nor spring. Our horse-drawn cutter slithered along the road, at times gliding smoothly over the packed snow and at others breaking through to the gravel below. It carried my father and mother and their most valuable possessions, which included some family pictures, a few heirlooms and me. It was April 1930, and I had just turned six.

The new farm sounded exciting when my brother talked about it. It was an average size for the times, three quarters of a section, three times the size of our old one, and he reckoned it would generate a proportional increase in income. He was so enthusiastic about it that he quit school at the end of grade eight to take up full-time tenant farming. It was the biggest mistake he ever made and it haunted him for the rest of his life.

### The New House

When I saw the house for the first time I had a sense of environmental loss. It was perched atop a knoll on the bald prairie, unprotected from the wind by even a single tree, a setting in marked contrast to that of the house we were leaving. My spirits rose somewhat when it turned out to have four bedrooms, which raised the possibility that I would have a room of my own. In addition, it had the usual farm kitchen, dining-sitting room and dirt cellar.

It was my first impression that was reinforced when we all woke up on our first morning in the house to find our skin covered with red sores. Inspection of the premises revealed that they were infested throughout

*The family's second farmstead.*
*The house is still occupied and has been fitted with new siding.*

with bedbugs. It took three days to get the formaldehyde necessary to eradicate them. In the meantime we searched for them in the bedclothing, mattresses, cracks in the floor and walls and in the corners of the closets, collecting them in jars containing kerosene.

The procedure for ridding houses of bedbugs called for putting formaldehyde in a porcelain chamber pot, pouring boiling water over it and getting out of the room as fast as possible. After doing this in my bedroom, my mother hurried down the stairs on her arthritic feet, exhaling vigorously to dispel the fumes, apparently not realizing that for every exhalation there was an equally vigorous inhalation.

**The New Barn**

The large, red hip-roofed barn was a marked improvement over the small, unpainted stable on our previous farm. A concrete alley wide enough to accommodate a farm wagon ran down the middle, making it possible to load manure directly onto the wagon instead of first loading it onto a wheelbarrow. There was a row of single stalls on each side for the horses and milk cows and two box stalls in the corners for newborn animals and their mothers. There was also a large loft for storing hay and straw. It had a hole in the floor through which feed was passed for distribution to the animals below. When I fell through it one day I was fortunate to land on a pile of straw that had been left on the concrete floor. The loft was a place where pigeons, sparrows and barn swallows congregated and where it was possible if, for any reason, someone wanted to stay out of sight.

As they gradually came out of hiding, it became apparent that the barn was teeming with cats. They were lean, scruffy animals that had survived by fighting over a scarce supply of food. In the process, they had become quarrelsome and they greeted humans with hostile stares. For their own sake as well as ours, something had to be done about them. Nowadays the solution would be to call the local branch of the humane society. In those days it was to shoot the adults and drown the kittens.This responsibility was assigned to my brother. One Sunday afternoon he reduced the cat population on the farm to two. They were required to sustain themselves on a diet of mice and a twice daily allotment of skim milk.

### The Ways of Farm Animals

To a boy growing up on a farm the most important building wasn't the house but the barn. That's where the baby animals were born, where you learned where they came from and got your first suspicion about where babies came from. It was where you learned that animals, like humans, have individual personalities, and it was a place where you could escape from adult surveillance long enough to find out about these things without being made to feel that you were wasting your time.

Baby pigs were the most interesting animals to watch. Within minutes of birth they began to search for a teat and, having found one, defended it against transgressors by bunting and shoving them away with their snout. A litter often contained a piglet that was too small to defend its position and got shoved from one teat to another until it wound up sucking the last one in the row, the one with the least milk. There is no better portrayal of the popular metaphors "the runt of the litter" and "sucking the hind teat" than that provided by a litter of suckling pigs. The runts never caught up with their siblings, even when provided with plenty of food. I found this out when I persuaded my father to give me a runt to raise on my own. I kept it in a separate pen and plied it with lots of feed, skim milk and "tender loving care." By the time it reached two hundred pounds the rest of the litter had long since gone to market.

Newborn piglets quickly established an hierarchy by engaging in the rough play characteristic of the young of all multiparous species. It consisted of shoving, bunting and biting their siblings. They had some long, sharp discoloured baby teeth ("black teeth") that were capable of inflicting injury on other piglets, their mother's teats and their own gums. They were snipped off at about three weeks of age using a pair of small wire cutters.

I learned that piglets are highly responsive to affection. When picked up and stroked, they gradually became limp, their eyes closed and they lapsed into a trance interrupted only by an occasional appreciative grunt. If scratched on one side they would lean in the opposite direction to expose more and more of their belly until they sometimes fell over onto the bedding, where they would lie with their eyes closed for as long as the scratching lasted. When a friend came to visit we would have a contest to see who could seduce the most piglets into this behaviour.

Pigs have an unwarranted reputation for uncleanliness that is attributable to the unsanitary conditions under which they are usually required to live. Given the opportunity, they are quite fastidious. When my brother built a wooden platform for a litter of newborn piglets to keep them off the cold cement floor, they used the platform exclusively as their bedroom, the floor around their trough as their dining room and the far corner of their pen as their bathroom. There was no eating and defecating in the same place as there is with cattle and horses.

The castration of male weanling pigs was the most barbarous practice inflicted on farm livestock. It was done to prevent development of the objectionable flavour of the meat of sexually mature male animals and was carried out on unanesthetized piglets using a pocket knife. For some incomprehensible reason an incision was made in the testicles, as the animal shrieked in pain, before they were removed. The open wound was sloshed with a solution of creolin to prevent infection, but postoperative morbidity was universal and mortality was common. There was a belief at the time that the pain threshold of animals was higher than that of humans. This belief also was held about primitive peoples by their colonial masters.

Newborn calves were almost as interesting to watch as piglets. I observed them from the time they began to emerge, hind feet first, from their mother's body to the time she freed them from the placenta and they were finally successful in standing up. At first they used their legs as braces and stood swaying on their feet, afraid to take the first step toward their mother's udder. This attempt usually ended in another fall, followed by a further tortuous effort to stand up again. When they were finally successful they suckled enthusiastically, encouraging the flow of milk by bunting their mother's udder and expressing gratification for a response by shaking their tail. Calves are not born hungry but they know instinctively that their mother's colostrum is necessary for their survival. If fed mature milk from birth most of them die of infection.

Weaning was a traumatic time for both the calves and their mothers. They bawled for each other at feeding time for several days afterwards. Teaching a calf to drink from a pail was one of my first experiences in animal husbandry. It involved inserting two fingers into the calf's mouth as a decoy for its mother's teat and pushing its head into the pail until its mouth was submerged in milk. Eventually it learned that the milk it was getting came from the pail and not my finger. I learned that some calves are born with sharp teeth.

**Dick**

Having passed my sixth birthday, I was considered eligible for certain additional privileges, the most prized of which was permission to ride Dick, a pony raised by my father that previously had been available only to him and my brother. He was an ideal pony for a boy my age, small enough to get on and off easily, gentle enough to be trusted and spirited enough to produce a thrill at full gallop. He ran with an easy flowing rhythm and his back was broad enough to collect water in a crease down the middle when it rained.

*The author with his horse, Dick (1931).*

Horses are not regarded as the most intelligent of animals, but over time Dick and I developed a strong mutual trust and understanding. He came to know, for example, that when I led him out of the barn at 4:30 p.m. for our trip to fetch the cows, I had to get aboard him by climbing onto the water trough before I could get onto his back and he voluntarily took up his necessary position beside the trough. There were times, when we were herding the cows toward the barn, when I would turn around on his back, rest my head on his rump, close my eyes and enjoy the gentle swaying of his body as he rounded them up on his own. He also learned that he could open the gate to the pasture by pushing upward with his nose on the wire that held it to the top of the gatepost.

In the summer my father clipped Dick's mane to give him a smart, crewcut appearance when he drove him to town. I rode him bareback and it wasn't always easy to stay aboard him without anything to hang onto. Occasionally, when he made a sudden turn at full speed, I wound up on the ground. He was always perplexed when this happened. Sometimes he would stop, look down at me, his ears pointed forward in obvious bewilderment with an expression that clearly said (at least to me) "What the hell are you doing down there?" Then he would stand still until I got up and led him to a fence or large stone from which I could climb back onto his back again. He loved to race the slower work horses and herd them into the barn. In hot pursuit of a runaway horse one day, he swerved under the branch of a tree that swept me off his back into the bushes below. At other times he was content to trot casually along the road pulling the cart or plod across the fields hauling my toboggan. He was a pony for all seasons and all boys growing up on a farm.

I was reminded of Dick by reading the following quotation attributed to a young Indian girl in the book by Gary Paul Nabhan and Stephen Trimble entitled *The Geography of Childhood* (1994). When asked whether she had ever been alone on the desert she was confused by the question. "Do you mean I'm completely alone?" "See, I ride out into the desert on my horse, and we stop to watch the sunset together... . I don't ever really feel alone, because my horse is there with me."

## Rights and Responsibilities

Inevitably, my new privileges were linked to new responsibilities. Besides fetching the cows from the pasture after school I was required to milk two of them. Sitting beside them on a hot summer afternoon was like sitting beside a furnace. When they flailed away at the flies that tormented them with their tail some of the blows inevitably landed about my ears. A neighbour who attempted to resolve this problem by attaching a brick to a cow's tail made the mistake of underestimating the power she could wield in that appendage.

Collecting the eggs, watering the horses, feeding the calves, weeding the garden, digging root vegetables, shelling peas and picking Colorado beetles off the potatoes were other duties gradually added to my repertoire. My final duty of the day was to prepare the kindling needed to start the kitchen fire in the morning. It wasn't a big job but I usually ended up doing it in the dark just before going to bed. Clearly, my parents no longer regarded me as belonging to the age of early childhood.

## The First Day of School

Before leaving for my first day of school my parents gave me the standard instructions: obey the teacher, respect my elders and keep quiet when they were talking. I left with more than the usual amount of intrepidation because I had little prior contact with the children in the community who were to become my classmates. I got aboard the horse-drawn summer van when it stopped in front of our house, clutching the Bee Hive Golden Corn Syrup pail that contained my lunch. The van had an arched canvas-covered roof that gave it the appearance of a lightweight American prairie schooner. There was a wooden bench down each side for sitting on and space underneath for putting our lunch pails and books. Otherwise, there wasn't a lot of furniture.

School began at 9:00 a.m. and ended at 4:00 p.m., with a fifteen minute recess in the morning and afternoon and a one-hour break at noon. The children who lived in town went home for lunch whereas those who lived in the country brought their lunch from home and ate it at school. A few brought lunch in a designated lunch box with a thermos containing hot soup in the top. The significance of this symbol of social class was not lost on the other children. There were lunch box students and syrup pail students.

I don't remember much about my first morning at school, but I have a clear recollection of the afternoon. After eating my lunch at school I went downtown to buy some jawbreakers (large, round, black licorice-coated candies) with the nickel my mother had given me. When it came time to return to school I mistakenly took the familiar road that led to our previous farm. After getting a half mile into the countryside, by which time I realized that I was lost, a truck driver recognized me and took me home, not knowing (because I didn't tell him) that I was supposed to be at school. I explained my three o'clock arrival at home by telling my mother that school had been let out early on the first day. That explanation lasted until she saw the school van going past the house at 4:30.

I successfully resisted going back to school until the matter finally was taken out of my hands. To make sure that I got there, my father and brother decided to take me in our Model T Ford. I did my best to elude them, but they cornered me in the farmyard, put me in the right front seat and locked the door. However, they neglected to lock the door on the driver's side, so I bolted out of it and took off again. They recaptured me with the help of a cousin who was visiting from England and I was deposited at the front door of the school. This episode conforms with my mother's definition of a hypocrite: a boy who goes to school with a smile on his face. From that point on my schooling went fairly smoothly. My father said that getting me started to school required an international effort but once I got started he couldn't get me stopped.

## My Primary School Teacher

The school I attended for all but four of my school years was a square two-story brick building consisting of a primary room on the first floor, a secondary and high school room on the second floor and two toilets, a furnace and a bare "recreation room" in the basement. The total enrollment of eighty to a hundred students was distributed fairly evenly among the four grades in the primary and secondary rooms and the three in the high school room. There was no grade twelve. Students who sought further education went either to grade twelve in a bigger school or directly to university. I was the second student in the history of the school to go on to university.

By the time I entered grade one my teacher was well into the second generation of pupils she had taught in the same room, and by the time she retired she had been employed continuously in the same position for over three decades. By contrast, most female teachers married and gave up teaching after two or three years. She taught all subjects to all four grades. Her teaching regimen would be an anathema to modern educators, but she managed to inculcate into most of us a phonetic approach to reading that enabled us to identify new words on our own, a foundation in arithmetic, spelling and grammar, and even the beginnings of an appreciation of the arts.

*Lenore school looking much as it did when it closed in 1979, less the belfry on top and a few shingles (c. 1991).*

Parents assumed less responsibility for their children's education than they do now. Children weren't taught how to read or given any information about their cultural background or natural environment before they entered school. These responsibilities were assigned to the teachers to deal with at their own discretion. I thought of this devolution of responsibility for children's education fifteen years later when I listened to the President of the University of Manitoba ask my graduating class to remember that the most important educational institution in our society was not the university or the school but the home.

I share fond and appreciative memories of my primary room teacher with all her former students whose views I have ever heard expressed. Her effectiveness as a teacher was due as much to the interest she took in the personal lives of her pupils as to her formal instruction. They knew they could trust her with the confidential information they whispered to her before the start of classes in the morning, and over the years she came to know more about what went on within families in the community than anyone else. She kept this information to herself and, knowing this, parents didn't resent the fact that she was privy to it. By the time she finally retired she was already a local legend.

## Our First Winter in the New House

Other winters may have been as cold, but the first winter spent in our new house remains in my memory as the worst I ever experienced. Keeping warm outside, by comparison, was a relatively simple problem that could be resolved by donning suitable clothing. The cold easily penetrated the walls of the house, which were completely unprotected from the wind on the outside and bereft of any effective insulation on the inside. The house was ostensibly prepared for winter by banking it with manure around the outside walls, filling the cracks around the window panes with putty, attaching storm windows and applying weather stripping around the doors. This did nothing to reduce the loss of heat through the walls and ceiling, the main sites of heat loss. The curtains over the windows swayed in and out according to the strength of the wind outside.

The kitchen stove provided a modicum of heat, but too little of it reached the living room to make it habitable during the day. In the evening my father started a fire in the wood-burning living room stove, which was incongruously called an "airtight heater." At times its thin sheet-metal walls became red hot and it was fully capable of raising the temperature in the room into the comfort zone. It would have no chance of approval for household use today under whatever rules apply to the safety of stoves. The fire went out shortly after we went to bed and the coal fire in the kitchen stove slowly petered out during the night, allowing the temperature in the upstairs bedrooms to plummet toward the temperature outside, which on some nights reached forty Fahrenheit degrees or more below zero.

On winter evenings my father sat in a rocking chair beside the living room stove and read by the light of a coal oil lamp. He was dressed in fleece-lined underwear, a flannel shirt, a heavy woolen sweater coat, two pairs of pants and socks, felt boots and an orange and black woolen hat (which he also wore in bed). My mother sat on the other side of the stove mending socks and other clothing items as usual. I sat at the dining room table, clad in clothes roughly analogous to those of my father (except for the hat) and tried to relieve my boredom by playing solitaire, looking at the pictures in the weekly *Free Press Prairie Farmer* one more time, leafing once again through Eaton's catalogue, drawing caricatures of animals and pursuing any other activities that didn't require putting my feet on the cold linoleum floor. Periodically it was necessary to remove my shoes, massage my toes and warm my feet against the stove. That didn't prevent the development of chilblains from chronically cold feet. I had no books or other reading materials to stimulate my mind and no other means of combatting the tedium of those long winter evenings. They were literally a waste of time.

If the temperature of the room got into the comfort zone my father would suddenly jump up, open the front and back doors of the house and let the winter wind blow through, declaring that the room was "full of foul air." This atrocity was a throwback to his days in an English school, when teachers periodically threw open the windows of their classrooms to flush out the germs presumed to cause rickets, unaware that it was the sunlight they let in that protected children from this disease and not the air they let out. In any event, there was no need to open the doors to let fresh air into our house. That was apparent from the drafts that kept us away from the doors and windows.

My mother washed the clothes every Monday morning. They were heated for one or two hours in soapy water in an oblong copper tub on top of the stove, the dirtiest spots were rubbed out, then they were rinsed and wrung out by hand. When hung on the clothesline they quickly froze stiff. In a strong wind my long winter underwear could be seen extended horizontally in the air. It slowly freeze-dried and became as soft as it would have in a modern clothes dryer. There was no such thing as "wash and wear" clothes. Shirts, dresses and handkerchiefs had to be ironed on the kitchen table using flatirons heated on top of the stove.

A half hour before bedtime my mother put a hot water bottle or hot iron in my bed to prepare it for my arrival. The sock used to cover the iron was one that had developed so many holes it was no longer suitable as footwear. It was necessary to balance the risk of burning my feet if I put them on the iron against the risk of getting chilblains if I didn't. I preferred a hot water bottle.

My bedclothes consisted of fleece-lined underwear, woolen bed socks, two pairs of flannel sheets, a woolen blanket and a comforter filled with duck down. A heavy sheepskin coat and my outer clothing were thrown on top of the bed. The bed socks served as insurance against being burned by the iron when I went to bed and freezing my feet on the linoleum floor when I got up. It was alleged that some children were sewn into their winter underwear in the fall and cut out of it in the spring, but this was a part of popular mythology about the Canadian winter.

In the morning the plaster ceiling glistened with frost and my pre-nocturnal urine sample was frozen solid in the chamber pot under the bed. I refused to get out of bed during the night to add to it. Before getting up I retrieved my clothes from the top of the bed, warmed them under the covers, then dashed downstairs and put them on by the kitchen stove after my father had the fire going.

### Chimney Fires

The resin produced by burning green wood accumulated in the stovepipes and periodically caught on fire. When that happened, the stovepipe that passed through my upstairs bedroom became red hot. It was a disconcerting sight for my mother and me, as we stood in the yard in the middle of a winter night, to see flames shooting out of the top of our house. My brother would climb onto the roof and pour salt down the chimney to dampen the fire. After a few such experiences, only firewood that had been allowed to dry over the previous summer was used for fuel.

## Winter in the Outdoors

There was a different dress code for different weather conditions, physical activities and social occasions. For anyone engaged in moderate physical activity (and nobody stood still for long) keeping warm outside was a relatively simple problem that could be resolved by wearing appropriate clothing. Temperatures above zero Fahrenheit called for fleece-lined underwear, two pairs of woolen socks, a flannel shirt, denim pants and a heavy woolen sweater, all worn under denim combination overalls. Wool was the main defence against the cold, but it is inferior to modern synthetics in insulating qualities, weight and moisture retention. It is better suited to sheep.

Continuous contact with the heat sink represented by the snow, ice and frozen ground made the feet most vulnerable to the cold. Leather shoes were disastrous from the standpoint of heat loss. A generally satisfactory style of footwear in mild weather consisted of two pairs of woolen socks worn inside felt boots covered by overshoes with thick rubber soles. In severe weather the felt boots gave way to knee boots made of half-inch felt, a form of footwear popular for farm work because it virtually eliminated heat loss from the feet, but too heavy and cumbersome for inside use. For playing soccer on packed snow at school, boys preferred moccasins with felt insoles and two pairs of heavy socks, but they weren't warm enough for continuous wear in the outdoors.

Social events that required travelling a long distance by horse and cutter wearing dress shoes called for a foot warmer, a flat metal carpet-covered receptacle containing a hot brick that was placed on the floor of the cutter. It was the custom for the host to keep the brick hot on the stove for use by guests on the trip home.

The other extremities vulnerable to frostbite were the fingers, which have a large surface area relative to their size. Gloves provide poor protection from the cold because they don't change this relationship. Mitts are better for reducing heat loss, provided they stop the wind, because they keep the fingers in contact with each other. Woolen mitts alone furnished little protection because they were porous to the wind, but when worn under a heavy leather outer mitt they were satisfactory under most winter conditions. My favorite handwear consisted of woolen gloves worn inside a rabbit fur mitt and a leather outer mitt. That combination made it possible to remove my gloved hands to perform tasks requiring manual dexterity without fully exposing them to the cold. Children learned to reduce heat loss from their fingers by forming a fist inside their mitt, a strategy analogous to the one used by birds that stand on one foot at a time so that the other one can be warmed against their body.

The kind of leather used in mitts also was important. One Christmas Santa left me a pair of cowhide mitts so stiff that I was barely able to bend them. I asked my parents why he didn't use reindeer hide instead. Evidently he got the message because the next year he left me a pair of soft deerskin mitts.

My clearest recollection of frostbite stems from the attention showered on me by my teacher one morning when I arrived at school with a thick, white left ear. The advent of earmuffs reduced the frequency of frozen ears among boys, but they were soon superseded by the "aviator hat," a headgear made popular by the epic flight of Charles Lindbergh across the Atlantic. It covered the sides of the face as well as the ears and the forehead. However, it was too plebeian to be popular among older boys on social occasions. No swain was about to show up on his girl's doorstep wearing an aviator hat.

Most other parts of the body were subject to frostbite only under unusual circumstances. As an early wearer of eyeglasses with metal rims, I learned to remove them before going outside in severe weather to prevent frostbite where they touched my face. There was a newspaper account of a city man who froze his private parts while jogging outside in a lightweight gym suit, but I never heard of any rural male who suffered this fate (or at least who owned up to it).

### A Flirtation With Radio

In an attempt to relieve the dreariness of winter we purchased a battery-operated radio from Eaton's catalogue. It was a Viking mantle model that required three small and three large dry batteries in addition to a wet battery. This equipment took up all the space in one corner of the living room. The radio brought in CKY Winnipeg and CKX Brandon, which we tuned into every night to get the same weather forecast (clear and cold) and much the same news. In the afternoon a station in Bismarck, North Dakota, introduced me to American culture with such programs as Jack Armstrong, the All-American Boy. I remember the radio mostly for a lot of static, whistling and controversy over who was running down the batteries fastest. It disappeared after one winter and we didn't get another one until we gained access to electricity nearly a decade later.

### The Advent of the Telephone

The disappointment generated by the failure of the radio was mollified by the success of the telephone. As soon as Manitoba Hydro erected the necessary wires along the road in front of our house all the families who lived on it found the money to connect to them. The telephone served not only to transmit information but to compensate for the social isolation of farm families during the winter. Each house was assigned a number that could be rung by making the appropriate number of long and short turns of a crank attached to the side of the wall telephone. The rings sounded on all the phones connected to the line and everybody soon became familiar with everybody else's ring. A ring to one house was followed by a series of clicks on the line as other householders (mostly farm wives whose husbands were working in the fields) lifted their receivers to keep track of what was going on in the district. Their interest was not always gossipy or prurient. Following a ring for a house where someone was known to be sick there was a burst of static as other householders listened in to find out how the patient was doing.

On the negative side, it was impossible to carry on a private conversation. This was a particular source of frustration for teenagers bent on dating. It also annoyed my father. After dialing a number, he would respond to the clicks on the line by saying "All right you ladies, go on back to your dishes." This admonition was followed by another series of clicks as they put their receivers back on the hook.

### The Spring of '31

It was the most welcome of springs. The snow and ice began to melt in late March. Soon thereafter the ducks returned to the pond behind the granary. By early April the weather seemed semitropical, an impression due mainly to the fact that most people hadn't yet shed their winter underwear or the habit of putting on a coat when they went outside. There were signs of renewed life everywhere. The hens ventured out of their house and began exploring the barnyard for food, the calves celebrated their release from the barn by frolicking in the pasture, the horses sought out the first sprigs of grass and the cats left the loft for the yard, where they picked their way carefully around the wet spots left by the melting snow. It was as if animals and humans alike had been let out of an internment camp.

# Chapter 4

## *The Great Depression and Me*

### The Dirty Thirties

The move to our second farmstead coincided with the onset of a drought that lasted for five years, a time known to all farm families who experienced it as the Dirty Thirties. Relentless west winds lifted the sandy soil from the fields on our farm and sent it in clouds across the landscape. Our house, situated at the east end of a hilly field, was directly in its path. There were times when all I could see as I looked out the kitchen window on the north side of our house was a sheet of yellowish brown soil flying past. We kept the windows and doors closed, even in hot weather, but by the end of the day the floors and furniture were covered with a layer of fine dust that had to be swept up with a broom and dustpan. The bedclothing was shaken out every couple of days and periodically the upholstered furniture was taken outside and beaten with a broom.

When my father and brother came in from the fields at the end of the day they reminded me of the pictures I had seen of coal miners emerging from the pits. Their faces were black except for white patches around the eyes where they had worn protective goggles. Even their sputum was tinged with black. Before eating supper they washed up over a hand basin on a wooden bench in the front yard. Any further ablution was deferred until Sunday morning when they bathed in a galvanized tub, shaved and put on clean clothes. My mother laundered their dirty clothing using a hand-powered wooden washing machine. By the time they had dried on the outside line they had begun to accumulate dust again.

Crops in the dry years were marked by short, thin stands of grain infiltrated by drought-resistant weeds such as the deep-rooted Canadian thistle and the shallow-rooted Russian thistle. When the Russian thistles died at the end of the summer the wind broke them loose from the soil and they rolled across the fields, scattering their seeds, until they encountered a fence. There they trapped the drifting soil, which in some places accumulated to the extent that cattle could simply walk over the fence. The only person who derived any benefit from Russian thistles was the country singer Gene Autry, who got a start on his eventual fortune with the proceeds from a popular recording called "Tumbling Tumbleweeds."

The drought and winds were caused by natural forces, of course, but the havoc they produced was aggravated by the system of land management in use at the time. Every third year the fields were taken out of production to enable bacteria to replenish the nitrogen removed by cropping and to provide an opportunity to eradicate weeds. However, ploughing under the stubble left by the previous harvest and pulverizing the soil with a cultivator and harrows to eliminate weeds increased its vulnerability to wind erosion. In addition, the practice of summer fallowing deprived farmers of a third of their productive land each year. As an alternative to summer fallowing, farmers sometimes planted a field in sweet clover or alfalfa to take advantage of the nitrogen-fixing capacity of the bacteria in the roots of these plants, but that did nothing to replenish the phosphorus and potassium removed by continuous cropping. Soil erosion was reduced in later years by the advent of tractors and the one-way disc, which left the stubble sticking out of the soil.

Farmers said they didn't use fertilizer because they couldn't afford to buy it, but the reality was that they couldn't afford not to buy it. It would be some years before they grasped the concept that by borrowing money from the bank in the spring to purchase fertilizer they could increase their acreage in crop each year by a third, as well as their yield per acre and their net income. Farmers in the American Midwest had long ago discovered that fertilizers were essential for profitable corn production. Fertilization has been mainly responsible for ending the recurring famines that once wracked underdeveloped agrarian societies in south Asia. In some respects western Canada at the time was still an underdeveloped territory.

Before the advent of herbicides, weed control depended on cultivation and this was cited as a prime reason for summer fallowing. However, weeds flourished in summer fallow because they had no competition from other plants. Canadian thistles thrived in the low places where their deep roots penetrated the subsurface moisture and by midsummer they were virtually impossible to eradicate by any form of cultivation. They were easier to eradicate prior to spring planting when their roots were still tender and shallow.

At best, the methods of farm management employed in the thirties were capable of sustaining only a subsistence level of farming. It would take a new generation of farmers with knowledge of scientific farming and farm management to raise the standard of living of farm families. Those who acquired these skills (many of them the descendants of the farmers of that day) are the ones who now own most of the land.

## Prairie Sunsets

One small compensation for the misery and hardship caused by the dust storms was the spectacular sunset they produced at the end of the day. Fine particles of dust in the air absorbed the blue rays in the setting sunlight and left a crimson aura of consummate beauty in the western sky. It was enhanced when there was a backdrop of cumulous clouds. I would sit on a hillside and watch the panorama change as the sun slowly sank toward and then below the horizon. I imagined I was watching it in a huge amphitheatre (which, in a sense, I was). But that was before the days of colour film and circular theatres.

### Migrants

Every week or so a wagon with a man and a woman on the seat moved slowly along the gravel road in front of our house. Typically, it contained a pile of their belongings in the back, one or two children on a second seat and a cow or horse tied to the back. It was drawn by two work horses and it always moved in an easterly direction. Sometimes the wagon would turn up the lane to our house, where my mother would provide the travellers with tea and lunch before they continued on their journey. If they arrived late in the day she served them supper, a place to sleep and breakfast in the morning.

To me it seemed to be a romantic lifestyle, akin to that of the pioneers on their way west to take up homesteads as depicted in the movies.The difference was that these travellers had already been west and were on their way back east after being blown off their land by the dust storms in southern Saskatchewan. They had no home, no possessions save for what they could carry with them, no food or money and nowhere to go except perhaps to a relative or friend who could provide them with temporary shelter.

### The Great Depression

Farmers tended to regard the Dirty Thirties and the Great Depression as interrelated calamities, the former the cause of the latter. They attributed their depressed financial condition to low crop yields caused by the drought, but the fact was that consumers at home and abroad didn't have the money to buy even the reduced amounts of grain and livestock the farmers produced. Higher crop yields would have resulted in an even greater surplus of farm produce and a further depression in the price farmers received for it. They were not mollified by the abstract notion that there had been a collapse of the world economic order. They blamed their plight on the drought, "the government" and "the banks."

The Great Depression was the "determining event" in the lives of many adults. My brother was so traumatized by it that fifty years later he continued to think and act as if it was still going on. It affected his whole outlook on life — how he viewed public and private institutions, his place in society and how he managed his business and personal affairs. The men and women who spent the Depression on a farm recall it as a time of demoralizing monotony, environmental havoc and hard work with little reward for performing it.

That is not how children growing up on a farm at the time remember it. I was unaware of the Depression except as a topic of conversation among adults. I had the best of food, adequate clothing and shelter, a horse I could ride wherever and whenever I wished, a dog, two cats and other animals as pets, a rifle I could hunt with in winter and summer and an unlimited countryside that I was free to explore at will. These amenities would be the envy of the sons of affluent parents today. The only thing I didn't have was money and I was fortunate enough to be too young to be burdened with the ambition to own a lot of things that there wasn't money to buy.

I learned from my peers in town that I had a better place to spend the Depression than they did. I lived not only "high on the hog" but high on beef and poultry as well. In winter the granary in our yard was stocked with chickens, ducks, turkeys and the best cuts of beef and pork. The depressed market for livestock made even the most expensive cuts of meat affordable to those who produced them. A neighbour who shipped an aged cow to a packing house in Winnipeg got a cheque back that failed to cover the cost of shipping.

The Great Depression is an example of the vastly different impressions children and adults often have of the same event. It was more than a decade later when I first encountered the startling proposition that our family had lived in poverty. It was published in an article written by an urban economist from information on farm income published by Statistics Canada. The government reported that farmers lost money year after year during the Depression, even though they had no money when it began and showed no signs of emaciation when it ended. Social scientists say that the cornerstones of the standard of living are adequate food and housing. I had plenty of both and so did my parents. The children who were poor during the Depression were not those on farms but those lined up with their parents at Salvation Army soup kitchens in the cities.

The following quotation indicates that my perception of the Depression as a child was not unusual.

> For those of us born before 1930 the Great Depression shaped our outlook on family, community, work, and the role of government. I was a child in those days and I still have vivid memories of neighbors losing their farms, and of daily newspaper and radio reports about growing unemployment, bread lines, and widespread homelessness.
>
> My family was lucky. We had a roof over our heads and food on our plates. Even so, by today's standards we were poor. We just didn't know it at the time because virtually everyone was in the same predicament.
>
> Eugene I. Lehrmann, President
> The American Association of Retired Persons
> *Modern Maturity* (July-August 1995): 94

These recollections indicate that up to a point poverty, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder. There is no doubt about the impoverishment of people who lack the food, shelter, educational opportunity and health care necessary for a full life, but I find it hard to sympathize with parents who complain that times are so bad they can't take their children to the sunny south at spring break.

The fact that many children were unaware of being poor during the Depression doesn't mean that it had no effect on their psyche. People who grew up at that time tended to adopt a modest lifestyle as adults, even though some became affluent. My brother hated to part with a nickel until the day of his death (and seldom did). I suspect that the adjustments I made to unconscious poverty as a child have persisted into unconscious affluence as an adult. The impression I acquired in childhood that clothes should be worn until they were worn out may account for the fact that the Shetland wool jacket and terylene shirts I bought in England thirty-five years ago are still hanging in my closet. The lining in the jacket has been replaced twice, but it still draws favourable comment on the few occasions that I wear it. The colour of the shirts has changed from white to a subtle tan but this change has coincided with trends in fashion. There are three pairs of shoes in my closet that, by the end of the millennium, will surpass the age of the twenty-six-year-old boots my father took back to Eaton's store to complain about the cracks that had developed in them. They already have been surpassed by my English winter coat. I wear these clothes today, as I did my clothes as a child, with no sense of being poor.

### The Farm Microeconomy

A farm microeconomy played an important part in coping with the Depression. What little cash flow there was arose from the sale of wheat and barley in the fall and livestock in the winter. The gap in income over the summer was filled by the sale of minor farm produce. The few excess eggs our flock of about twenty hens produced in the summer were sold through a local store for as little as six cents a dozen. The proceeds, referred to as "the egg money," were used to buy sugar, spices, baking powder, yeast and other food items that couldn't be produced on the farm. My contribution to the egg money was to collect the eggs every day after coming home from school. When shut up in the unheated hen house in winter the hens responded by shutting down egg production.

Once a week we also got "the cream cheque," amounting to two or three dollars, in return for cream we shipped to a local dairy on "the cream truck." The money went for such things as kerosene for the lamps and tools (usually secondhand) needed to maintain the farm machinery. My contribution to the cream cheque included bringing the cows in from the pasture, helping with the milking and separating the cream from the skim milk. "Separating the milk" was an operation carried out using the De Laval separator kept behind the kitchen door. It was performed twice a day, the first before breakfast while the wheat or oatmeal cereal was cooking on the McClary stove and the bread was toasting over wood coals, and the second before supper while the men were washing up after coming in from the fields.

Most of the skim milk was fed to the pigs, which provided another stabilizing source of farm income, but a portion was reserved for the two cats. It included the head of foam that formed on top as it accumulated in the pail. Sometimes I yielded to the temptation to nudge one of the cats from the rear as it was drinking, whereupon it would emerge from the dish with a halo of suds.

The biggest expenditure of the year came after the sale of grain in the fall, when an order was made up from Eaton's catalogue. It was understood that frivolous items were noncompetitive and that the emphasis was on clothes needed for the coming winter. It was the only opportunity I had to acquire the items I most coveted, after spending weeks poring over the catalogue. They included my first aviator hat, fur mitts and felt boots.

### Hiring Summer Help

The main farm labour pool consisted of Ukrainian immigrants admitted to Canada to fill the needs of the English and Scottish farmers. The descendants of peasants, they were accustomed to farm work and their experience on the steppes made it easy for them to adapt to farming conditions on the Canadian plains. Some English farmers used the word "Ukrainian" as a common noun, that is, they talked about hiring a Ukrainian in the same context that they talked about buying a horse. Both were regarded simply as a source of farm labour. To combat unemployment during the Depression the government paid hired men five dollars a month and paid farmers five dollars toward their board and keep. That cost the government less money than having the unemployed on relief.

One Sunday morning my father and brother announced that they were going to "hire a Ukrainian" to help mother in the house and they set off in the car for Shoal Lake, a Ukrainian district about forty miles away. They returned in the late afternoon with a sixteen-year-old girl named Mary, who was carrying all her belongings in a small suitcase. She was a quiet, blond, sturdy girl and in return for five dollars a month and board she tended the garden, carried water from the well, helped with the milking and assisted my mother with the housework.

Mary had not "hired out" over the summer before and she suffered from the loneliness of being away from her family and friends for the first time. She found herself in a household headed by an aging English couple with little appreciation of the difference between her culture and theirs. My mother treated her kindly but my father had the English penchant for making a hired girl feel like a hired girl. Although my brother was about her age he never socialized with her. He had no difficulty socializing with the daughter of an English farmer we hired the following summer. The English class consciousness was kept alive, if only in a modified form, by the sons of English settlers in Canada. Mary could hardly wait till the end of summer when she could go back home.

### Hiring a New Teacher

In a school with only three teachers, hiring a new teacher was a matter of personal interest to a third of the students and at least as high a proportion of parents. It was the topic of conversation over lunch one Sunday when my cousins were visiting. There were two contenders for a vacant position in the secondary room, one a single woman and the other a married man. There was unanimous agreement that the job should go to the man because he had a wife and children to support, whereas the woman lived at home with her parents. No consideration was given to their relative qualifications in terms of educational training or experience.

Men were considered unsuitable as primary school teachers because they lacked the compassion and temperament necessary for child nurturing. Positions in the elementary grades usually were filled by local girls who had recently graduated from high school. It was possible to get a temporary teaching certificate without attending Normal School. Most of these girls had no interest in teaching as a career and soon left the profession to marry the sons of farmers. They chose the independence and security of a farm wife over the uncertain tenure and certain penury of a teacher. The salary of my secondary school teacher was $600 per year, with no allowance for board or benefits. The possibility that a woman could be both a farm wife and a teacher wasn't seriously considered. Farming was regarded as a family enterprise that required the energies of both parents as well as their children.

### Relations Between the Sexes

Farm women had less economic and political power than men in the thirties but they were accorded a higher social status. The tenet that women were ethically and morally superior to men was instilled into boys by their fathers and reinforced by the community. I was taught by my father and brother that women were kinder, more compassionate and of a higher moral order. My mother's empathy for children and animals, the sick and the needy, reinforced this perception. Women were the ones who bore the babies, cared for the children and dedicated themselves to the welfare of the family. They occupied a position of honour at the centre of the family, held veto power over most decisions and usually managed the family finances. Farm wives were sheltered from hard labour, dirty jobs and foul language. When my father overheard me trying out my first cuss words one day he admonished me, but not for cussing because that was considered manly and men were fatally flawed. I received the same admonition countless boys before me had received: "Don't you let your mother hear you say things like that!"

School boys were bound by a cultural imperative to defend their mother's honour against any slur made by another boy, even if it meant confronting a bigger student. Boys told lots of jokes about the dissolute behaviour of men but none about that of women. It was inconceivable to them that their mothers could have any interest in sex, which was considered a price women had to pay in return for marriage, children and economic security. My mother was protected from even the sight of mating farm animals. When the bull addressed a cow in heat in the farmyard one day my father and brother chased them around to the back of the barn out of sight of the house. After I expressed my curiosity about what was happening in the barn when a stallion was brought to the farm to service a mare I was told by my mother that "it wasn't nice" and to stay in the house. Children learned about sex the old-fashioned way: from their peers and older boys at school.

Many farm wives, of course, were protected out of everything they owned. Women had only recently been given the right to vote and still hadn't acquired an equal right to property. Most wives settled into their traditional responsibilities for child rearing and food preparation. When it came to major financial decisions, such as whether to buy new machinery, sell livestock or acquire more land, they deferred to their husbands. Men were given this right in accordance with their traditional roles as providers and as protectors of the family. Failure to provide for the family was cause for social disdain.

## Ethnicity, Race and Social Class

Sociologists say that social class is determined by income, but race, ethnicity and national origin had a strong influence on the social infrastructure of the Lenore community. Scottish and English residents, who were in a large majority, comprised the merchants and landowners and filled the appointive positions as teachers, minister, postmaster and railway station agent. Two Irish Catholic families were considered to belong to the same social class, but they didn't participate in many community activities, which were usually organized by members of the Presbyterian church. There was no "trouble" between Catholics and Protestants of the kind that currently exists in Northern Ireland, but there was evidence of the persistence of some ancient myths. The son of one of the Irish families, with whom I was friendly, told me in deadly seriousness one day that their Scottish neighbours boiled chicken manure in their tea kettle. It didn't occur to either of us to ask ourselves what use they made of it afterward.

A Dutch farmer who came to town occasionally to buy groceries was regarded as an affable fellow, but I never learned his name because he was always called "The Dutchman." Likewise, my father always referred to a farmer who lived only a mile away as "The Belgian." I didn't learn his family name until I met his son in school. A farmer who lived in a neighbouring district was referred to as "The German," in tones that implied no further characterization was necessary. All these people were British subjects but they were regarded by the British as foreigners. There was no such thing at the time as Canadian citizenship.

There were no Jewish people in the community, but occasionally a man allegedly of Jewish descent visited our farm driving a small motorvan and inquired whether we had any chickens for sale. My father refused to deal with him because he had heard that Jews visited farms in the daytime to find out where the chickens were kept and returned at night to steal them.

There were also no blacks in the community and except perhaps for a porter on the railroad most people had never seen a black person. Their impression of blacks was based on the subservient roles they played in Hollywood movies and the way they sounded on the Amos 'n Andy program on the radio. They were regarded as simple, harmless folk and many people were indignant when they read about discrimination against them in the United States. But their indignation didn't extend to accepting them as equals. When a woman read about an Afro-American teacher whose house was firebombed after he moved into a white neighbourhood in the United States, she used a common cliché to express her indignation: "If he has proved himself he should be able to live anywhere he likes." Whites were presumed to have proved themselves when they were born white. During the black civil rights movement years later an English farmer offered me the opinion that black men were angry with whites because of "what we did to their women." Because I was white he took it for granted that I was a part of his "we." Mixed marriages were regarded as immoral and against "natural law."

Neither my father nor any of his contemporaries ever identified himself as Canadian. My oldest brother, who was born in England, maintained that he came to Canada because it was a part of the British Empire and he wanted to live under the Union Jack. That was obvious nonsense because he was brought to Canada by his parents at an age when he had no idea what the Union Jack meant. Changes in the cultural profile of Canadians that took place after World War II left my parents' generation of Britishers bewildered and resentful. They felt that in some way they had, after all, lost the war. To make matters worse, their descendants joined postwar non-British immigrants in demanding that they be identified as Canadians. They resented the colonial attitude of many English immigrants and referred to them as "bloody Englishmen," a term implying that they knew, at once, everything and nothing about Canada.

As the Depression drove the price of land lower and lower, Canadians of Ukrainian descent found it easier to acquire farms. The land of farmers whose approach to farming in Canada was still mired in the English system of land tenure was particularly vulnerable. Many Ukrainian hired girls married the sons of British farmers. Their upwardly mobile children quickly moved into the middle class as large-scale farmers, businessmen, teachers and the mayors of small cities.

The settlers of Chinese origin were regarded by the British as leftovers from their forebears who were admitted to Canada as labourers to aid in the construction of the railroad to British Columbia. It was assumed that they would all go back to China after the railroad was finished and as an inducement to do so they were not allowed to bring their families with them. Nevertheless, when they sent part of their wages home to their families they were criticized for lack of gratitude to Canada. The few who stayed on in their familiar roles as laundrymen and restaurateurs were subject to unfounded myths and allegations. A classmate in school confided to me that the shiny crust on the pies served in the Chinese restaurant in Kenton was due to saliva incorporated into the pastry by chewing it before the pies were baked.

Many years later I took my father to a Chinese restaurant in Winnipeg to celebrate his eightieth birthday. It was his first Chinese meal and he picked his way through it as if was a minefield. The image of Chinese immigrants as labourers and caterers has changed in recent years to one of professionals and businessmen. Their rapid social ascendancy in these roles has fostered resentment among some descendants of the former British establishment. But as a former member of that establishment who had the misfortune to get caught in Toronto on a Sunday in the 1950s, when even window shopping was forestalled by hanging drapes over them, I appreciate the vitality the Chinese and other ethnic minorities have brought to that city.

The bottom rung of the social order was occupied by the Native Canadians, who were regarded by the English as fit only for the most menial of tasks. A farmer who had let the manure pile up in his yard all winter told me one day that he was going to "hire an Indian" to spread it on the fields. It wasn't a job for an Englishman or even a Ukrainian. It was a job for an Indian.

## The Church

The only church in Lenore was the Presbyterian church, which provided services to all the religious factions in the community except for two Irish Catholic families, who were visited once a month by a priest. A proposal to change the name of the church to the United Church of Canada was turned down. My father and mother were brought up in the Church of England. They didn't attend the church in Lenore nor did they attend the Episcopalian Church in Kenton after we moved to that district. The sudden appearance of the minister at the door one day brought on a frantic search for the family Bible. It was finally found in a cardboard box in the closet of an upstairs bedroom.

I attended Sunday school for a time and an occasional morning service as an adult. The services were attended by a core congregation of about fifty regular members and were supported by a choir and organist. My father kept admonishing my brother and me for not attending church regularly although he never attended himself. It was an example of Mark Twain's contention that there is nothing so heartwarming as virtue in other people.

My mother was skeptical of the value of prayer and most other formal religious exercises, but there were times when she took refuge in her early religious education in England. For a somewhat frail woman who spoke in modulated tones, she had a surprisingly strong singing voice and on unpredictable days she would apply it to her large repertoire of Church of England hymns. On these occasions her voice reverberated throughout the house and, when the windows were open, extended to the outdoors. At such times we all knew that she was under severe emotional stress which was further manifested in a marked change in her demeanour as she went about her work. These episodes were disturbing while they lasted but happily they usually lasted only one day.

## Local Politics

There were no formal political party organizations in the district and few people divulged their party preference. However, there was one vocal supporter of the Conservative party in town who provided rural residents with a free ride to the polls on election day. Criticism of the government for not doing something about the depressed state of the economy was a general theme. In Canada, as in the United States, it was the conservatives who paid the price. The dynamic New Deal program of Franklin Roosevelt, who had defeated Herbert Hoover for the presidency of the United States in 1932, caught the attention of Canadian farmers. Mackenzie King's 1935 defeat of R.B. Bennett was highly predictable. The fledgling farmer-labour Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) led by M.J. Coldwell (later renamed the New Democratic Party) attracted the support of idealistic young people but frightened away farmers and businessmen with its proposal for nationalization of property. It wasn't until the Depression was over and this proposal was dropped from its platform that the CCF gained power in either province. The federal Liberal party co-opted much of the CCF social program and incorporated it into law. Farmers had a popular spokesman in J.G. Gardiner from Saskatchewan, Minister of Agriculture in the Liberal government.

# Chapter 5

## *The Farm Calendar*

### Picking Stones

Each spring new stones mysteriously appeared on the surface of the summer fallow. The small ones amounted to little more than a nuisance but some were big enough to pose a hazard to farm implements and those who operated them. The worst ones were the boulders that lay just below the surface of the soil. The plough would ram into them without warning, like a ship striking a hidden iceberg, sometimes with enough force to throw the rider off the seat and against the high steel wheel on the left side. Any lull in fieldwork was devoted to removing stones from the summer fallow. The smaller ones were piled onto a flat wooden "stone boat" and hauled away to a gully. The larger ones were pried out of the ground with a crowbar or pulled out using a horse and logging chain.

Despite all these efforts, the number and size of the stones that appeared on the surface of the summer fallow each spring remained unchanged. This prompted one farmer to write to *The Free Press Prairie Farmer* and ask if stones grew. He got a somewhat snide reply, but given the circumstantial evidence it wasn't an illogical question. A more likely explanation was that the high rate of soil erosion from summer fallow exposed new stones each year.

### Seeding

Seed grain had to be cleaned to remove weed seeds and treated with a fungicide to prevent mold damage in the soil. Weed seeds, mouse droppings, insect parts, broken kernels, dirt and other contaminants were removed using a fanning mill, a contraption containing a large fan that blew these constituents out of the grain as it trickled from a hopper on top. The fan was turned either by hand or by a gasoline engine (in our case by hand).

There was a standard procedure for treating the cleaned grain with fungicide. A pre-mix was prepared by mixing a prescribed amount of formalin with a sample of cleaned grain, pouring it over a pile of grain estimated to meet the next day's requirement for seeding and turning the pile over three times using a scoop shovel. Finally, the pile was left overnight to allow the formalin to soak into the grain. This ritual was performed by my brother and me every evening during the planting season, one working on each side of the pile.

The seed grain was planted using an eight-foot seeder fitted with a seed box on top and a series of flexible tubes that regulated the flow of seeds to disks that opened the soil just before they dropped and closed it just afterward. There was little glamour in the seeding operation. The main considerations were to make sure the grain flowed evenly through the tubes and that there were no overlaps or gaps between rounds of the field. I was never entrusted with this responsibility, because any gaps would be apparent to the neighbours when the grain sprouted and would be attributed to ineptitude on the part of my father or brother.

### Haying

Haying was the opening act of the harvest season, a time when wild prairie grasses, slough hay, sweet clover and alfalfa were cut, dried and stored in the loft of the barn or outside in stacks for use as feed for the cattle and horses in winter. In the 1930s the hay harvest had not been mechanized to the extent of the grain harvest and consequently it was a dusty, labourious process.

The hay was cut using a five-foot mower drawn by two horses. According to the experts, the loose hay was supposed to be dried in the sun long enough to generate the vitamin D needed to prevent rickets in calves during the winter, but not long enough to destroy the carotene needed to prevent vitamin A deficiency. This was to be accomplished without any prior knowledge of whether the sun was going to shine or, if it did, for how long. Another consideration was that moist hay could produce enough heat of fermentation in the loft of a barn to start a fire. This was not an unknown cause of losing a barn. The success of haying, like that of most other farm operations, depended heavily upon the weather and the conversation of farmers was dominated by the prospects for rain or shine.

The loose hay was gathered into windrows and then into mounds using a horse-drawn eight-foot rake. This uncomplicated device was the first farm implement I was allowed to operate on my own. Nothing more was required than to drive it over the mown hay and step on a foot trip so that the accumulated hay was deposited in long rows. The rows then were compressed into mounds by a similar process. The rest of the haying operation was dependent on hand labour. The mounds of hay were loaded onto racks using long-handled three-tined forks, hauled to the mow of the barn or a stack and unloaded by the reverse procedure. My role in this operation was to drive the racks from one mound to another and tramp the hay down as it was loaded and unloaded.

My mechanically inclined brother reduced the hand labour associated with haying by constructing a device called a sweep. It consisted of two heavy twelve-foot wooden planks bolted together with enough space in between to attach a swinging arm at the ends. A horse was hitched to each arm and they were driven down the windrows, one on each side, sweeping the hay across the field and up a wooden ramp onto the top of the stack. While this simple device saved much of the labour involved in putting hay up in stacks in the summer, it added to the labour required to retrieve it in the winter. The hay became so intertwined by the tumbling motion of the sweep that it had to be cut out of the stack using a hay knife, usually when the temperature was below freezing and there was a wind blowing out of the northwest.

## The Grain Harvest

The grain harvest was the crowning event on the annual calendar. Before the introduction of combines and swathers, the crop was harvested in a series of operations extending over about a month. Six- to eight-foot binders drawn by four horses were used to cut the standing grain, tie it into sheaves and drop them onto the stubble to form windrows. The sheaves had to be "stooked" (that is, stood on their butts in groups of seven or eight) to prevent the grain in their heads from spouting in contact with the soil. Getting the stooking done before it rained was a matter important enough to mobilize the energies of boys and sometimes women. Stooks have long since disappeared except on a few farms whose owners don't have to rely on them for their livelihood. They were much in evidence in a 1995 British Broadcasting Corporation videotape, narrated by Prince Charles, on the virtues of traditional farming.

Threshing was another event that is remembered quite differently by those who were children at the time and those who were adults. Adults remembered it as the most hectic and exhausting event of the year and children as the most exciting. It was carried out by gangs of about ten men made up of neighbouring farmers and their sons and hired hands. There had to be one farmer who owned a threshing machine and a tractor to drive it. They moved from farm to farm, threshing out most farmers in two or three days.

The sheaves were loaded onto large racks and hauled to the threshing machine by two draft horses. The machine was located so that the straw was deposited in a place convenient for feeding and bedding the livestock, usually against the side of the barn, in the loft or in a nearby pasture. Threshers were strange-looking machines, somewhat resembling a camel. They performed a series of operations that included cutting the twine around the sheaves on a set of knives, beating the grain out of the heads on rotary cylinders, separating the grain from the straw on a series of oscillating sieves, elevating the grain into a wagon and blowing the straw into a pile at the back. These operations were coordinated by a series of belts and the whole process was powered from a master pulley connected to the tractor by a huge drive belt. To a farm boy in the 1930s it was the ultimate in high technology.

By 7:00 a.m. the men had fed, cleaned and harnessed their horses and eaten breakfast. There were five meals in the course of the day, starting with a breakfast of hot oatmeal or wheat cereal, bacon or ham and eggs, fried potatoes, toasted homemade bread, jam and coffee or tea. It was followed by a midmorning lunch of biscuits, jam and hot tea or coffee, eaten beside the threshing machine when the men came in with a load of sheaves. While they were eating, somebody else (such as myself) was recruited to feed their sheaves into the threshing machine. The main meal of the day was served at noon. Typically, it consisted of roast beef or pork, new potatoes and two additional vegetables from the garden, homemade bread or biscuits, pie and tea. The twelve-inch pies were cut in quarters and it was not unusual for someone to have two pieces. At four o'clock in the afternoon sandwiches, hot tea and cake were delivered to the men in the fields (also usually by me). Supper was served after the men had come in from work at 7:00 p.m., unharnessed, watered and fed their horses and washed up. It was a simple meal of cold meat, fried potatoes, a vegetable, bread, cake and tea. The energy intake in the course of the twelve-hour day was about 5,000 calories; nobody gained weight.

The farmers who lived nearby usually went home to sleep at night. Those who stayed were in bed by nine o'clock. When there weren't enough beds in the house, some of them slept in the hayloft or in an empty granary. Farmers prayed for sunny weather until the end of the harvest, but after a couple of six-day weeks the hired men, who were paid by the month, prayed for rain. Some years later, when I had graduated to full membership in a threshing gang, we were threshing out a farmer who was known in the community for his fair and considerate treatment of his men. He told us when we arrived at his farm that he "didn't want anybody killed" in the course of threshing his crop. Two mornings later, when he went around to wake up the men, he found his brother dead in his bed.

Threshing was equally hard on farm women. My mother hired a friend from town to assist her when the threshing gang was visiting and I was recruited into such additional duties as digging potatoes, shelling peas, making butter in the earthenware churn and running innumerable errands. One day, in desperate need of something from the store for dinner, my mother sent me to town on Dick to get it. It was the first time I was allowed to ride him into town and from then on I rode him on similar errands regularly.

Eventually the last wagonload of wheat had been hauled to the town elevator (where it sold for about 50¢ a bushel), the best barley had been sold for malting and the rest stored in the granary to be ground for pig feed. The oats were reserved for feeding the horses and the oat straw (the most digestible of the cereal roughages) was stored in the loft as feed for cattle. Tramping down the straw as the threshing machine blew it into the loft, along with a lot of chaff and dust, was the dirtiest job of the threshing operation and it was performed without the benefit of a face mask. Wheat straw was blown against the back door of the barn, through which it could be retrieved for bedding in the winter without going outside. As the stack was gradually hollowed out it became a popular playhouse for visiting children. The beards in the barley straw rendered it unsuitable for anything except bedding for horses and cattle.

The milk cows and fattening cattle were accorded ground barley ("chop") and the best quality hay. The chickens had to get by on "screenings," consisting mainly of weed seeds and broken kernels recovered from the fanning mill and the threshing machine. On the basis of some bad advice, my father grew purple-topped white turnips (which he called "Swedes") as feed for the milk cows. I was designated to chop them up with a hand ax before feeding them. The cows liked them, but it is hard to imagine another feed as destitute of the nutrients needed for milk production.

### Postharvest Celebrations

Completion of the harvest, good or bad, was celebrated by taking a trip. One fall my brother motored to Regina with a more affluent cousin whose mother had given him a new six-cylinder Essex sedan for his twenty-first birthday. The car was only a year old and Regina was only two hundred miles away, but his cousin overhauled the engine in preparation for the trip. Another fall my mother took the train all the way to Vancouver to visit her sister Annie, whom she had not seen since leaving England some thirty years earlier. It turned out to be a fitting use of part of the small inheritance she received from her father because she was not to see her sister again. The following year she used the rest of the money to send my brother on the same trip as a reward for the years of work he had put in on the farm.

### Visits to "Bob and They"

On a Sunday afternoon my father would suggest that we go to visit "Bob and they," by whom he meant his first cousin and family who lived on a farm some four miles away. Their family included a daughter a year younger than I was and a son a couple of years older than my brother. "Uncle Bob" was a consummate English farmer who dropped his h's and added his s's. When I went to visit my cousin one day I found him digging in the ground with his hands. He looked up at me and said " I likes the feel of the soil."

We would pile into our Model T Ford and start off along the gravel road to "Uncle Bob's place" with the top down. In "the dry years" there was seldom any need to put the top up. If we were lucky, we would get there and back without having to fix a flat tire, but there were days when, by the time we got home, we had fixed as many as five. Each involved jacking up the car, removing the wheel, prying the tire off the rim with a tire iron, finding the hole (usually by inflating the tire and smearing it with saliva), cutting a patch out of an old inner tube, applying it to the hole with rubber cement and reassembling the whole thing. Sometimes the time spent fixing flat tires exceeded the length of the visit. We would leave for home by seven-thirty in the evening to be reasonably sure of getting there before darkness fell three hours later.

Uncle Bob's house was a gathering place on Sunday afternoons for all manner of relatives, friends and neighbours. It was the custom in rural communities in those days to visit without prior notice. Announcing that you were coming implied that you expected something extra to be "laid on." Nobody "laid on" anything for company except another plate on the table. Would that it were the same today.

The men sat on the linoleum floor in the kitchen, their backs against the wall and their legs protruding into the middle of the room, conversing in loud voices about the condition of the crops, the vagaries of the weather, the greed of the bankers and the treachery of the politicians. They expressed their views with such force and conviction that I couldn't understand, as I sat listening in a corner, how anyone could disagree with them. It was reassuring to know that I had an extended family who had the solution to all the major problems of the day.

There was, of course, an extra work load associated with these visits and most of it fell on the women. They couldn't prepare just a light supper because the appetite of men engaged in heavy labour all week doesn't suddenly decline on Sundays. The female visitors pitched in to help with meal preparation and at intervals a man was dispatched to fetch something from the ice house, root cellar or garden. The women felt no sense of servility by being expected to cater on Sunday to a predominantly male clientele that took up most of the space in the kitchen they needed to do it in. My first impression of female servility came on a trip to Europe, where I saw elderly women scrubbing the steps of public buildings early in the morning in London, cleaning the men's washrooms in Cologne and handing out toilet paper to men entering the lavatories in Moscow.

Uncle Bob and his son built a second barn on their farm to house a pig enterprise. The profits from this enterprise were instrumental in enabling them to purchase the farm they had hitherto rented. They exhibited their best purebred Yorkshires at district fairs. There was no more contentious subject during those Sunday visits than the decisions of the judges. Sometimes I visited my cousin during the summer holidays and we would pretend that we were judging the pigs at a fair. I ranked the sows on the basis of their size, which ranged from three hundred to five hundred pounds. I didn't tell her, but I ranked the boars on the size of their testicles, which hung on their buttocks like melons.

## The Postharvest Trip to the Mill

At the end of the harvest season my father took a sample of our best wheat to a mill to have it ground into products for human and animal consumption. The sample was thoroughly cleaned of foreign materials by passing it through the fanning mill twice, then it was bagged and loaded onto a "democrat wagon," a vehicle intermediate between a buggy and a farm wagon. My father took me with him on these trips and we sat side by side on the high spring seat as we made our way the several miles to the only remaining mill in the district, which was located north of Kenton near Hamiota. He chose one of those glorious fall days that make up for the harsh winter and explain why people brought up on the prairie always harken back to it. We didn't hurry the horses and they seemed to sense the mood of the journey as they sauntered slowly past copses rich in the colours of fall and birds in search of ripened seeds.

We got home late in the afternoon with our sample of wheat subdivided into several parts: flour for breadmaking (after it had been allowed to mature in the attic for a year), bran for muffins and other food items, shorts for the weanling pigs and middlings to ease their transition to a ration of ground whole grain. Bread was made with the help of a "starter" consisting of a yeast culture grown in the warming oven over the stove and incorporated into the dough. After a few hours on top of the oven the dough formed huge mushroom-shaped loaves that overflowed the sides of the pans. When augmented with butter and jam and eaten while still warm, fresh homemade bread occupied a place near the top of my heirarchy of favourite foods.

## Fall Ploughing

The harvest was scarcely over before it was time to begin preparing the soil for the next year's crop. Some fall ploughing was necessary so that it could be completed in the spring in time to take full advantage of the short growing season. Ploughing was the slowest and dreariest of farming operations. It was carried out using two-furrowed ploughs drawn by four or five horses that plodded back and forth across the open fields as the driver sat immobile on the steel seat, fully exposed to the cold October winds. Periodically it was necessary to dismount and walk beside the plough to keep warm.

Boys were pressed into sharing the misery of fall ploughing at an early age. There wasn't much danger of serious injury, but a sudden encounter with a hidden stone could throw an unsuspecting driver off the plough or against one of its steel parts. The horses learned to stop immediately when this happened and, indeed, they were always ready to do so. When tractors came into use as a source of farm power the horse-drawn two-furrowed plough was the first implement discarded.

## Securing The Winter Fuel Supply

The final task of the fall was to replenish the supply of fuel for the following year. Aspen (white poplar) trees that grew in the Assiniboine River valley several miles away were the main source of fuel for cooking and heating. A full day was required to take two flat-bottom wagons to the valley, cut down the trees, remove their branches, load them onto the wagons and transport them back to the farm. The wagons were fitted with posts along the sides to hold the trees in place. When fully loaded they were too heavy for two horses to pull up the valley hill and had to be taken up one at a time using four horses hitched in tandem.

Tree cutting and hauling went on for about ten days each fall. In sunny weather it was pleasant to spend a day in the woods, where we were sheltered from the wind and there were species of wildlife such as grouse, jays and "bush rabbits" not seen on the upland plain. For me there was also the novelty of building a fire and making hot tea to go with the sandwiches my mother sent for lunch. I never did come to a clear understanding of who owned the trees.

The comfort level changed dramatically as the sun set and we began our slow homeward journey across the open prairie. Perched atop the trees on the wagon, I sometimes became so cold that I no longer cared and wanted only to go to sleep — a sign of clinical hypothermia. About halfway home we sometimes dismounted and walked the rest of the way beside the wagons to keep warm.

Our Model T Ford became so unreliable that we replaced it with another second-hand model, which had a hard top and glass instead of mica in the windows. My brother salvaged the front wheels from the old model to build a horse-drawn cart and mounted the engine on skids so that it could be put to such uses as powering the grain crusher or driving the circular saw used to cut up the trees. The blocks of wood were thrown in a pile and left to dry over the following summer. I was excused from the sawing operation because of its hazardous nature. The extent to which I was responsible for splitting the blocks into pieces that would fit into the stove the following year was never fully resolved, at least not to my satisfaction.

## Fowl Suppers

Each fall a fowl supper involving nearly everbody in the community was held in the basement of the church. Roast chicken and turkeys were the centrepieces of the menu, but it reflected the full gamut of the fall bounty including the traditional tarts, cakes and pies. The fowl supper was particularly popular with children because it was one time when they could eat all the pumpkin pie with whipped cream they wanted without incurring the disapproval of their elders.

## Winter Concerts

The Scotch [*sic*] and Irish concerts were two social highlights of the winter season. The preponderance of Scots in the community was reflected in the greater grandeur of their program. Harry Lauder, the legendary Scottish balladeer, visited Canada in the early 1930s as did the "Scotsman," a new locomotive built by the descendants of James Watt, inventor of the steam engine. The Scots were elated when the Scotsman hauled the Canadian Pacific Railway passenger train through the Rocky Mountains to Vancouver ahead of the schedule set by the customary three Canadian locomotives. The Scotch [*sic*] concert was planned to mark the birthday of Robbie Burns, said by Scots to be the only poet whose birthday is celebrated around the world (a claim based on the ubiquitous presence of Scots). The star performer, a local farmer, was a credible rival to Harry Lauder as a balladeer. His name is still associated with the annual Scotch [*sic*] concert almost as intimately as that of Santa Claus with the Christmas concert.

The success of the Irish concert depended more on the popularity of Irish songs than on the input of the few residents of Irish descent in the district. Nonetheless, just as many people showed up, most of them wearing "a touch of green" and claiming Irish ancestry for a day. There was no English concert, but the perennial master of ceremonies at the Scotch [*sic*] concert, the Irish concert and most other community events was an Englishman of consummate grace and humour who, between these occasions, ran the post office.

# Chapter 6

## *Things too Complex to be Understood by Adults*

### The Generation Gap

Adults were always talking about things that they obviously believed to be of crucial importance, such as whether it would rain before they got the seed in the ground, the hay in the mow or the sheaves in the stack, whether it would hail before they got the crop off and why the government didn't do something about the price of wheat. These were the things that the men talked about as they sat on the edge of the water trough when "Bob and they" came to visit on a Sunday afternoon. Their discussion would end with Uncle Bob's pronouncement that it was all the fault of the government and my father's affirmation "Too damn true!" The women, meanwhile, were discussing their own agenda in the house.

None of these things was a significant topic of conversation between me and my cousin as we played in the yard. We were interested in such questions as whether the rooster with the long red wattles would mate with the hen with the silver feathers.

### The Hierarchy of the Chickens

Over time I came to recognize that there were hierarchies among the cows, the horses, the pigs and even the chickens. The social order among the chickens was the hardest to figure out because they didn't line up for anything and the hens all looked pretty much alike (at least to me). Judging from the promiscuous behaviour of the roosters they all looked alike to them too. The population of roosters was limited to four, a number considered sufficient to meet the need for fertile egg production by the two dozen hens. I learned at an early age that hens don't need roosters to produce eggs, only to produce chicks.

The males were easily distinguishable from one another by differences in their plumage and their "peck order," which was reflected in the success of their mating proclivities. The dominant male was a magnificent Plymouth Barred Rock that strutted around the barnyard every morning, running off his competitors as he made his round of the females. Birds mate during the day because their poor night vision makes them vulnerable to predators on the ground at night. Besides, it's difficult to mate on a branch.

### The Hierarchy of the Cows

As Dick and I herded the cows along the trail from the pasture to the barn I noticed that they always walked in the same order. The line was headed by a cow named Rosy, which had a deformed horn caused by a botched dehorning operation when she was a calf. This operation involved killing the horn bud by rubbing it with a stick of caustic potash. She was followed by a retinue that reflected the relative position of the other cows in the herd. Rosy was a robust animal that had only to swing her head in the direction of the others to discourage them from challenging her for leadership. She even showed disdain for the dog, which avoided direct confrontation with her as he made his rounds of the herd, nipping at the heels of the stragglers. When a large roan cow purchased at a farm sale was introduced into the herd, it took several days for her to find her place as number three in line as they made their way toward the barn.

### The Finer Features of Horses

I was impressed by the somber colour of the horses' eyes, their oblong pupils and the softness of the skin on the sides of their muzzle. They didn't like to be touched on their muzzle because the skin is thin there and consequently that was where the noseflies bit them, but after a while they came to realize that when I stroked their muzzle I wasn't after their blood. Another impressive feature of horses was that my father could cut chunks of tissue out of the underside of their hooves and drive nails through them to anchor their horseshoes without causing undue discomfort.

### Grasshoppers

The drought brought on an infestation of grasshoppers (properly called locusts) which, though not on the scale of the scourges described in the Bible, was severe enough to cause serious damage to the crop. A walk across the pasture raised a continuous spray of "hoppers" and after a trip in the car the windshield had to be scrubbed to remove their yellowish brown remains. The municipality provided poisoned bait to put out in the fields, but it was impossible to distribute it over the whole farm and there was no incentive for grasshoppers to seek out poisoned food when there was lots of unpoisoned food available where they were.

As with most other problems that plagued adults, children found a positive side to the locust infestation. Grasshoppers came in a variety of sizes and colours, and my peers and I at school collected them to see who could get the most colourful and the biggest. Our favorites were the large green ones because when they were squeezed they exuded a dark brown liquid that we called tobacco juice. The largest ones were a dull brown colour that suddenly became yellowish green on black when they opened their wings in flight. A decade later I had to learn the Latin names of all the grasshoppers for a course in entomology. They were more fun when I was a kid.

### My First Rabbit Hunt

An American living in Canada once said that the difference between Americans and Canadians was that Canadians asked if they could do something before doing it and Americans did it unless they were told they couldn't. As the son of English parents I dutifully obeyed their prohibition on my use of our .22 caliber rifle despite a strong inclination to violate it. Rabbits left their tracks in the snow around the farmyard every night when they came to pick up loose grain, and they could be seen in the daytime hopping across the open fields and around the edge of bluffs and bushes.

Whether it was the influence of American culture or not, after arriving home from school one winter day I took the rifle and three cartridges out of the granary where they were stored and set out in search of rabbits. I didn't have far to go. A rabbit hopped out of some roadside willows not far from the house and sat still and upright in the bright sunshine. It was a hard target to miss.

I took my trophy home and waited until my parents and brother had finished a hearty dinner and were enjoying their tea before I brought it into the house. Any impulse they may have had to reprimand me was overcome by their astonishment that I, whom they still regarded as a child, had gone hunting on my own and bagged a rabbit on my first try. It was the rabbit that saved me. If I had returned empty handed it would have confirmed their judgement that I was too young to hunt. As it was, from that time on I went rabbit hunting whenever I could afford the ammunition. The only negative aspect of this episode was that it led my elders to conclude that if I was old enough to hunt I was also old enough to take on additional responsibilities on the farm.

### My First Encounter With an Indian

Dumas Ocopaw was a Sioux Indian who lived on a reservation about ten miles to the east. Each summer he made a tour of the Lenore district in his buggy, stopping at houses where he had developed a social rapport. A quiet, soft-spoken man, he would spend an hour or so chatting with my mother in the kitchen before getting up to leave, whereupon she would give him a bag of tea. The first time he saw me he turned to her and asked "Him your papoose?" She assured him that I was.

### My Only Encounter With Chewing Tobacco

One summer my father hired a man from town under a government program to combat unemployment (that is, the government paid each of them $5 a month). He was a large, friendly man in his fifties and I enjoyed working with him in the fields. We were stooking together one dry, hot day in August when he took a plug of chewing tobacco out of his pocket, bit off a chew and offered it to me. I was at an age when boys feel compelled to rise to that kind of challenge and I bit off a modest chew. It didn't taste very good but I enjoyed seeing how far I could spit the juice. All went well for about fifteen minutes, when I began to feel an unease that quickly developed into the kind of nausea and despair associated with sea sickness. I lay in the shade of a stook for the rest of the afternoon while he finished the stooking alone. It was my only indulgence in chewing tobacco. Not long afterwards, while employed on another farm, he failed to come in from the field at the end of the day. He was found dead, leaning against a tree with his half-finished lunch beside him.

### A Visit From My Niece

My sister and her two daughters, who lived on a farm about fifty miles away, made a rare visit one day in what was probably the summer of 1930, when I was six. The older girl, two years my senior, had red hair, a pale complexion and always wore a clean floral summer dress. When I took her on a tour of my favorite haunts around the farm I noticed that she was careful not to get near any cow droppings along the way. We were in the midst of playing a game in the yard when she suddenly jumped up and ran into the house. I asked my mother if she knew why my niece had run away and she said it was because I had used the word "darn" in the course of our conversation. She refused to associate with me for the rest of her visit. After that I always referred to her as "my nice niece." I never saw her again. She died in her sixties and I've often wondered whether a little cow manure might have fertilized our relationship.

### The Day That Mother Kicked the Cat

My mother had the English love and empathy for animals. She had this feeling for the house cat but she kept it at a distance because she was afraid of tripping over it on her arthritic feet. One day when the cat was rubbing against her ankles as she was hanging out the washing from the back step of the house, she put her slippered foot under its belly and dropped it a few inches onto the ground. My brother witnessed this event and spread the story that he had seen mother kick the cat. The mental image this generated was so outrageous that it was always greeted in the family with hilarity, no matter how many times it was told. It became a reference point in the chronology of family events. There were things that happened before the day that mother kicked the cat and things that happened afterward.

### A Neighbour Who Made Bread

There was a regular bread-making day on every farm. It was a day between Monday, which was washday, and Saturday, when the children were home from school. Some women were better at making bread than others. I learned that the best bread within travelling distance on Dick was made on Thursdays by a Scottish lady who lived on a farm a couple of miles away, and I would arrive there shortly after getting home from school. As I entered the house I was greeted by the incomparable aroma of freshly baked bread and the sight of a dozen huge, airy loaves on the kitchen table. She cut them in thick slices and always had lots of butter and strawberry jam to put on them.

### The Mystery of the Black Rubber Ball

One of my brother's most prized possessions was a solid black rubber ball. It was a hybrid between a sponge rubber ball and a baseball, solid enough to be driven a long way with a bat, resilient enough to rebound when it was thrown against the barn wall, and soft enough to be caught without a glove. He warned me not to play with his ball but sometimes when he was working in the fields I would find where he had hidden it. I was playing with it one day when I felt an urgent need to visit the outdoor privy. As I sat waiting for nature to take its course, I passed the time by tossing the ball against the opposite wall and catching it on the rebound. Suddenly it ricocheted off a rafter and disappeared down the other hole in the seat. It was some time before my brother missed it and by the time he asked me if I had seen it I was able to tell him with some degree of integrity that I hadn't seen it recently. The fate of his black rubber ball was one of the mysteries he took with him to his grave some sixty years later.

### My Father's Black Leather Boots

There was always a controversy over my recurring need for new boots. My father attributed this problem to the fact that (for lack of a football) I spent a lot of time kicking tin cans around the farmyard. He didn't consider the fact that I was actively growing and needed a new pair of boots once a year anyway, only that my shoes kept getting a hole in the toe. He always cited a pair of black leather boots he had worn for over ten years. Every Sunday morning he took them out of the closet, polished them, wore them on his casual weekly inspection of the farmyard (being careful to avoid any manure or mud) and then put them back in the closet.

Over the years his shoes developed a network of fine cracks and when he retired to Winnipeg my brother suggested that he take them back to Eaton's store and lodge a complaint. He did so and when the clerk asked him how long he had owned them he said twenty-six years. The clerk said he would have to consult the manager about it. After a time the manager emerged and told my father that if he was willing to relinquish his boots he could select any new pair in the store at no charge. His old boots were put on display as testimony to the quality of Eaton's merchandise. In the meantime, the problem of the holes in the toes of my boots was resolved when Eaton's introduced boots for boys with a copper band around the toe (so-called "copper-toed boots").

## The Monthly Trip to the Store

At the end of each month my father went to town to pay the grocery bill. He took me with him in the cart my brother had constructed from the front wheels and seat of our old Model T Ford. It was a quiet, comfortable vehicle from which to enjoy the view of the countryside as Dick pulled it along the road at his usual leisurely pace. After my father had paid the bill the grocer would invite me to choose a candy bar from the collection he kept under his glass counter. At first I chose Sweet Marie for its caramel taste, but then I switched to Eatmore because I found that it was chewier, laden with peanuts, and lasted until we got home. Those monthly trips to the store were among the few occasions when my father and I spent time alone together.

# Chapter 7

## *Our Last Farmstead*

### The Trials of Tenancy

The Great Depression was hard on landowners as well as tenants. Rental agreements usually called for providing the owner with a third of the proceeds from the sale of the crop. The oats and most of the barley were used to feed the animals, so the agreement applied mainly to the wheat crop. Low wheat yields and prices eroded the incomes of owners as well as tenants. A hundred acres of wheat that yielded fifteen bushels an acre selling for 50¢ per bushel generated a gross income of $750. The owner had a claim to $250, the equivalent of twenty-one dollars a month over the year. Although the tenant bore the cost of producing the owner's share of the crop as well as his own, the owner had to pay the municipal tax on the land, whether or not the tenant paid his rent. Sometimes tenants discharged part of their obligation to the owner by performing work in his name on municipal roads. Each year my father and brother hauled gravel from a local pit and spread it on the road that ran past our farm. In those days farmers gave no credence to income tax.

At the expiration of our five-year lease on the farm in 1934 the owner decided to rent it to two cousins. The only suitable rental farm available was located in the neighbouring district of Kenton. For my parents, that meant leaving the Lenore community where they had lived ever since coming to Canada. For me it also meant going to a new school.

### Our Newest New Farmstead

It was a large farm for the times, one and a quarter sections, and the quality of the land was better. It had an imposing stone house with three bedrooms upstairs, a bedroom, living-dining room, kitchen and summer kitchen on the ground floor and the usual dirt cellar. There was still no electricity or central heat.

The farm had many features that appealed to a boy my age: sloughs that harboured ducks, coots and snipes; bluffs where Hungarian partridges and sharp-tailed grouse hid during the day, open fields frequented by killdeer, crows, hawks, magpies, red-winged blackbirds, kingbirds and cowbirds.

*The family's third farmhouse, near Kenton.*

Meadow larks launched their lyrical call from the top of fence posts and swallows, sparrows and pigeons built their nests in the farm buildings. A walk across a field usually roused a rabbit, gray squirrel, skunk, groundhog, weasel or badger, and a foray through the bluffs an occasional fox, coyote or white-tailed deer. To me the most important feature of a farm was its natural habitat, not its capacity for food production. I took food, shelter and clothing for granted. It was another case of the generation gap.

The view from our new farmyard was a marked contrast to the barren outlook from our previous one. A grove of box elders on the north and west provided summer habitat for goldfinches ("canaries"), orioles, wrens, woodpeckers, warblers and robins. When the leaves fell in the fall the orioles' nests could be seen swinging from the branches, suspended by horse hairs, their entrance clearly visible near the top. Having seen pictures of domestic canaries in a bird cage, I decided to catch a wild one and give it to my mother as a gift. Unhappily, the mouse trap I set caught the bird by its neck instead of its foot. I concealed this episode from my mother.

The trees broke the north wind and the blowing snow accumulated behind them to the extent that by midwinter it was possible to ski over the telephone wires that ran across to the house from a pole beside the road. I excavated a snowhouse in the bank and used it to make ice cream in a syrup pail from a mixture of cream, milk, eggs and vanilla flavouring. The trees also served as a daytime haven for rabbits and birds that came into the farmyard to feed at night.

## Getting to School

For some reason it wasn't feasible for the school van to begin coming to our house in the middle of the term, so it was decided that I would go to school for the rest of the year on horseback. I have no recollection of being consulted about this decision. It was three miles to Kenton by a route that went through our pasture, over a creek, across two fields, a set of railroad tracks and a half mile of prairie to a gravel road that led to town. To an eleven-year-old the trip provided just enough adventure to make it interesting but not enough to cause anxiety. I imagined that I was riding across the Wild West in the tradition of the cowboys I had seen in the movies. There were no coyotes or buffalo along the way, but it wasn't difficult to aggrandize the dogs and cattle to simulate them in my imagination.

My main concern on the way to school was whether Dick would jump over the creek or run through it. His decision was important and I never learned how to predict it with certainty. One morning when there was a thin coat of ice on the water he approached the creek at a gallop, then suddenly braced his feet after I had positioned myself for a jump and sent me over his head into the water.

I left Dick at the livery stable during the day and picked him up after school. I was the envy of the town kids as they watched me ride off into the sunset in the style of the cowboys they had seen in the final scene of Hollywood movies. It was a different ride on the way home. Unhurried by any deadline, I dawdled along, watching the spring unfold, from the greening of the grass to the return of the meadow larks and the emergence of the prairie wild flowers. There was no doubt about how Dick would cross the creek on the way home. He would saunter across it at his casual homebound pace.

## Social Functions

In summer a wooden floor was laid in the Kenton curling rink and it was used to show movies and hold dances. The dances drew large crowds from the neighbouring districts and occasionally attracted a big-name band, including Mart Kenny and his Western Gentlemen, the leading "big band" in western Canada. I was too young to attend the dances but I rode my bicycle the three miles into town to see the movies. They started at seven o'clock to enable those who had to travel a long way home afterward by horse-drawn vehicle or bicycle to get there before dark. I had to start out early to negotiate the rough road to town on my bicycle in time for the opening scenes. One afternoon, after I had pestered my mother as she was preparing the evening meal for the family, she said "All right, have some eggs" and pointed to the warming closet over the stove, where I found a plate containing scrambled eggs. I ate them and left for town. It turned out that they were a dozen eggs she had cooked for the whole family.

There was a lawyer in town who had the best kept house and yard, a gracious wife, a pretty daughter (a classmate in school) and a new Model A Ford sedan. One Saturday evening he and his family came to our house, picked up my mother and me in their car and took us to see Nelson Eddie and Jeanette Macdonald in their romantic movie about the Canadian Mounties entitled *Rose Marie*. They had arranged for a wheelchair for my mother and she was thrilled by the scenery and the music. It may have been the only movie she ever saw. At about the same time the lawyer's wife gave me my first hairbrush. It was one her husband had received as a gift. She said he had four hairbushes and no hair.

## The Teaching of French

By the time I graduated from high school I had passed the French exam with a grade of "A" every year for five years and had developed a fair reading knowledge of the language. I had yet to have a teacher who could speak French or to hear it spoken by anyone else. My first encounter with oral French came when I met a student from St. Boniface College at the University of Manitoba. On a visit to France as a young man I was able to read the menu but not to tell the waiter what I wanted in the language of the country.

French was taught in the schools of western Canada for a political rather than an educational reason. That was fair enough, but nobody ever explained what the political reason was, namely that there were two major cultures in Canada and that French was the language of the other culture. None of us knew anybody who spoke French and there was no alternative way of learning to speak it. There were textbooks on English literature, chemistry and algebra that students could consult to make up for deficiencies in instruction in these subjects. There was no textbook they could consult on how to speak French.

When children asked their parents who "the French" were, they were usually told that they lived in Quebec, had large families, were increasing in numbers at an alarming rate and would eventually outnumber the English. There was a cynical saying among English farmers that all the French did was fish and copulate and in the winter it was too cold to fish. This English paranoia became paradoxical in later years when the birth rate in Quebec fell to a level scarcely sufficient to maintain its population.

I was one of few students who got any benefit out of learning to read French. It helped me to earn a doctoral degree in science, which at the time required a reading knowledge of English, French and German. I passed the reading exam in German after taking one course from a German-speaking instructor. Soon thereafter scientists spontaneously adopted English to fill their need for a common language and English is now well on its way to becoming the world language. This development has profound cultural and political implications for Canadians. It means that if Francophone Canadians are to keep up with the rest of the world and preserve their own language they will have to be bilingual, whereas Anglophone Canadians will not.

### Weekend Visits

In high school it was the "in thing" at the time for a student to spend a weekend at another student's house. Apart from their social value, these visits sometimes provided insights into the lifestyle of other families that were different from those that might have been expected.

I spent one weekend at the home of a classmate whose parents operated a large farm. He was an affable, outgoing fellow, though I thought that at times his use of profanity was a bit excessive. He had a sister a couple of years his junior and it soon became apparent that their relationship was not uniformly harmonious. On the first day of my visit the three of us gathered at the dinner table along with their mother, a large blond woman who had been left in charge of the farm while her husband was away on business. She took this responsibility seriously. When the two siblings got into a verbal altercation that culminated in his calling her a particularly vile name, his mother looked up in horror and issued the following prohibition: "Oscar, you dirty little bastard! You stop that goddam swearing!"

### The Summer of '35

It was as if we had moved to another country. The hot winds and dust storms of the early 1930s had given way to cool breezes and frequent rains that brought the wheat seedlings shooting out of the soil. In place of short, stiff stalks there were tall, dense stands of wheat that rippled in the breeze. The calves thrived on the green pastures and the cows were fat and productive. The Depression, it seemed, was finally over.

Misgivings began to set in about mid-July. Dark brown spots appeared on the wheat stalks and they began to crinkle and lodge against one another. Then the seed heads began to shrivel. The farmers were told that their wheat was infected with stem rust, a fungal disease that flourished in cool, damp weather. Instead of harvesting their wheat that year they went along the upwind side of their fields spreading a fire that consumed the entire crop. For weeks the usually clear prairie air was blue with smoke as it may not have been since preagricultural times when lightning set fire to dry native grasses in the fall. There wasn't enough wheat threshed to provide straw for bedding the livestock in winter and it was necessary to use feed-grade oat straw instead. The summer of '35 turned out to be the end of the drought but not of the Depression.

### Gophers

After the deluge of rain in 1935 the summer weather on the prairies reverted to its usual semiarid pattern. This favoured proliferation of Richardson's ground squirrels or what were commonly referred to as "gophers." They dug burrows in the fields big enough to imperil farm implements and ravaged the crop around their large colonies. My father had a thirty-five acre field of oats that they kept green all summer. The municipality provided farmers with poisoned food to put out in the fields but, as with the poisoned food for grasshoppers, there was too much unpoisoned food around to make it attractive.

I was encouraged to dispose of as many gophers as possible and by any means. To this end I used leghold traps, snares, drowning, my .22 caliber rifle and even a homemade slingshot. The slingshot wasn't a very accurate weapon, but the first time a stone I launched with it found its way to the head of a gopher peaking through the grass left an impression that has survived in my memory banks ever since. When a burrow was close enough to a slough I poured water down it until its occupant emerged at the top, coughing and gasping, where it came face to face with the family dog.

Leg traps were the least humane but the most economical and effective means of eliminating gophers. The municipality offered a bounty on them of one cent each that could be collected by turning in the tail at the municipal office. The tail was easily pulled off and I collected them in a tobacco can for two or three weeks before taking them in. By that time they had become infested with fly larvae in the warm summer weather and when I handed the can to the municipal clerk, a bald middle-aged man who was always fastidiously dressed in a white shirt and tie, he would remove the lid, take a quick look at the contents (which were in a state of slow motion) and throw them into the fire. He was quite willing to take my word for the number of tails in the can. I never cheated him except on a rare occasion when I caught a gray ground squirrel, which has a tail twice as long as that of Richardson's ground squirrel, and on the questionable premise that it should be worth twice as much I would divide it in two. My one-day record was 104 tails and one summer I collected some 1,500, enough to purchase my first bicycle. Catching gophers benefited the whole family. I enjoyed being outside in the summer, my father was pleased to have the gophers eliminated from his fields and my mother was glad to have me out of the house.

I shot some gophers with my old .22 caliber Cooey rifle, which had been given to my brother by our older brother and handed down to me when he bought a new Savage. It wasn't a very satisfactory or even safe firearm. Apart from having poor sights and a short barrel, the breach had become so worn that periodically the cartridge casing ruptured when it was fired, blowing powder past the end of the bolt into my eyes. I repaired the breach by melting babbitt in the workshop forge and pouring it into the gap between the end of the bolt and the cartridge casing. This lasted for variable periods of time before the babbitt came loose and had to be replaced. One time I neglected to remove the powder from the cartridge before pouring in the molten metal and the bullet ended up in the wall of the granary where my brother was at work cleaning grain. He was unaware of this incident. It was one of a number of things that I never told him about.

The cost effectiveness of shooting gophers was tenuous. Ammunition cost half a cent per round, so in order to break even it was necessary to recover one tail for every two shots. That wasn't an easy task. When Richardson's ground squirrels are approached, they have the habit of dashing down their burrow with a flick of their tail (hence the nickname "flickertail gopher") and then poking their head back up to keep track of what is going on in the vicinity. This presents a severe challenge to a hunter. A gopher's head is a small target under the best of conditions and it was usually obscured by grass or growing grain. Another consideration was that when hit in the head, particularly by a hollow-tipped so-called "mushroom bullet" that disintegrated on impact, a gopher slithered a foot or two down the hole before it stopped kicking. To retrieve the tail it was necessary to reach down the hole, grasp the shattered head and drag the carcass out. That was one reason my mother insisted that I wash my hands before dinner.

There were occasions when more than one tail could be retrieved with a single shot. In the early summer litters of young gophers emerged from their burrows and foraged in the surrounding grain. When they sensed danger, they would run back to the burrow and lie side by side around the perimeter, ready to dash down at any moment. Sometimes they failed to recognize the right moment. On a number of occasions I collected two tails with a single rifle shot and on one occasion three.

I was shooting gophers one day when it occurred to me that a telescope mounted on top of my rifle would be a great asset in visualizing the head of a gopher peeking through the grass. I resolved to invent a rifle someday with this feature. Shortly thereafter I saw one for sale in Eaton's catalogue. The same fate befell my resolution to invent a pen with a light in the tip for writing in the dark.

The skill I acquired shooting gophers stood me in good stead when I was in basic training in the army. We were required to lie in a row on the firing range and shoot at life-sized human dummies programmed to spring up some fifty yards in front of us. For me it was like shooting at the side of a barn. I would start by knocking down the dummy in front of an urban compatriot three or four places down the line and work my way back to the one in front of me.

### Crows

Wildlife biologists have had a hard time making up their minds about crows. At various times they have classified crows as good birds, bad birds and behaviourally neutral birds. I've often wondered whether crows would ever have been classified as bad birds if they were white instead of black. Surveys have shown that people have a generally more favourable impression of white birds than of black birds. The birds in Alfred Hitchcock's movie *The Birds* were black. The English language is rife with expressions in praise of whiteness, such as the commendation "that's mighty white of you" for having done something good.

In the 1930s the crows that lived in Manitoba (as opposed to those that lived in Saskatchewan) were classified as bad birds. It was alleged that they robbed the nests of good birds, although it was never made clear just what birds those were. The municipality offered a bounty of five cents for each crow's egg shell or pair of feet previously attached to an adult bird (in other words, you couldn't collect on both the egg shell and an embyo's feet). These acquisitions had to be turned in to the clerk at the municipal office, the same one who took gopher tails.

I surveyed the bluffs on our farm for crows' nests at regular intervals. The presence of a nest containing eggs or young was signalled by the protests of adult birds flying overhead. The eggs were olive green with black spots, a colour that provided camouflage, and they were so attractive that it was tempting to leave them in the nest. They looked like tiny citrons, a melon we grew in the garden.

Retrieving the eggs was not always a simple matter. Crows build their nests near the top of a tree, presumably to discourage animal and human predators. In addition to the risk involved in climbing the tree there was a risk of being bombed in the process. A friend who looked up a tree to locate a nest at the wrong moment was hit full in the face by a bird's scalding excrement. There was the further problem of getting the eggs down the tree without breaking them. My usual practice was to put them in my cap, bend over and place the cap carefully on my head, then work my way down, being careful not to bump my head against a branch. On one occasion this strategy failed and I experienced my first egg shampoo. When the eggs were safely down, a hole was made in the small end with a pin, a larger hole in the big end and the contents were discharged by blowing through the pinhole. The shells could be put to other uses. I am one of few people who have drunk slough water out of a crow's egg shell.

Crows are difficult to shoot with a rifle because they have small bodies concealed under a deep layer of feathers that exaggerate their size. It was exasperating to take dead aim at a seemingly large bird, pull the trigger and see it nonchalantly fly away. Crows were easier to shoot with a shotgun, but the cost of the shell consumed the whole bounty. Anyway, by the time I was old enough to use a shotgun the wildlife biologists in Manitoba had decided that crows weren't such bad birds after all and the bounty was removed on both their eggs and their feet.

### Wild Ducks

Ducks were hunted for sport, food and crop protection, usually in that order. Duck hunting requires a shotgun and for a long time I was frustrated by being considered too young to handle one. I finally decided to defy this prohibition as I had previously the one on my use of the .22 caliber rifle. After arriving home from school one day I took my father's double-barreled shotgun and two shells from the granary and set out for a slough a half mile from the house. I crept up on a mallard duck swimming close to the shore until it was within point-blank range, at which time my hunting instinct overcame the ethical prohibition on shooting a sitting duck. It met its inevitable fate. I wasn't entirely free of trauma myself. It was the first time I had fired a shotgun and in anticipation of a heavy recoil I made the mistake of holding the butt away from my shoulder instead of tight against it. My shoulder and cheek were tender for several days afterward.

As the dead rabbit had done after my unauthorized hunt with the rifle, the dead duck saved me from reprimand after my unsanctioned hunt with the shotgun. I had, after all, fired one shot and got one duck. I didn't tell my father that it was a sitting duck, but he may have suspected it from the number of buckshot we encountered when we ate it for dinner.

From that time on I hunted ducks whenever I had the opportunity and the money to buy shells. The most successful outing yielded five ducks with one shot as a flock rose off the water. My short duck-hunting career was not entirely without incident. While hunting one evening with an old single-barrelled shotgun we had found in the boiler of a steam engine left on the farm by a previous tenant, a small flock of ducks that failed to see me in the semidarkness suddenly appeared directly overhead. I let fly with my single shell. The barrel fell off the gun, leaving me holding the stock, and a duck plummeted to earth a few yards away.

### Tame Ducks

Raising domestic ducks was my first farm enterprise. A Scottish lady who lived on a farm a couple of miles away (the same one who made bread on Thursdays) gave me a dozen duck eggs. I put them under a broody hen, which sat on them without complaining for the extra seven days beyond the twenty-one required to hatch her own kind. She also didn't mind that the eggs were oversized or that the nine hatchlings she produced were not what she expected. Nor did she seem to mind walking around the yard followed by a bunch of web-footed offspring. Hens have a strong maternal instinct and will sit on anything that looks like an egg. It was common practice to put a chalk "nest egg" in their boxes to induce them to begin laying eggs.

I don't know what happened to all the ducks but from then on we had both duck and turkey for Christmas dinner. They went well together, the soft fat of the duck complementing the dry meat of the turkey. The female ducks that survived the Christmas season began producing eggs in the spring and I had the first choice of them for breakfast. That summer the ducklings had real mothers, their numbers increased from nine to twenty-nine and they became part of the farm microeconomy.

Through another "curious set of circumstances," I associate my duck-raising enterprise with the famous rematch of Joe Louis and Max Schmelling for the heavyweight boxing championship of the world. The lady who gave me the setting of duck eggs had a radio and sometimes I rode Dick to her house to listen to important events. I decided to do so on that occasion. My oldest brother, who was not known for punctuality, said that he wanted to go too. By the time he got ready and we got to our destination by horse and cart the first round of the fight was over and so was the boxing match.

**Tame Wild Ducks**

Sometimes a wild duck would make her nest in a grainfield and when it was uncovered during the harvest she would abandon the eggs. On one such occasion I gathered them up and put them under a "clucking hen," i.e., a hen advertising that she was anxious to brood some chicks or any reasonable substitute. She hatched out six pintail ducklings. Some tame ducklings hatched at about the same time and they all waddled around the barnyard together, the tame and the wild, as they grew up. Eventually the wild ducks discovered their ability to fly and they made short aerial excursions around the yard, leaving their earthbound peers behind. My brother grounded them by clipping the long feathers on their wings. When they became adults the wild ducks knew that they were "birds of a feather," and they travelled together in the daytime and slept together at night. One night a weasel invaded the pen where they were sleeping and killed them all.

The weasel is one of a few animals that kill for the love of killing. I had an opportunity to take revenge on the ducks' behalf shortly thereafter when I saw one in a field as I was carrying my rifle. Mortally wounded, it stood on its hind legs and snarled at me. Weasels have the capacity to paralyze rabbits with fear. One day, as I was walking across a field, I heard an animal shrieking in terror. It was a rabbit, crouched at the mouth of its burrow, that was being stalked by a weasel. It was apparently powerless to move, even though it was unharmed and could easily have outrun its predator.

**Wild Geese**

In the fall, waves of Canada and snow geese ("wavies") appeared in the sky on their way south for the winter. They put down to feed in grainfields in the late afternoon and then moved to a slough or lake to spend the night. The sight of a flock of snow geese feeding in a field was a harbinger of winter.

Geese were more difficult to hunt than ducks because, as migrants, they had no regular feeding grounds. Ducks fed in the same field every afternoon and returned to the same slough every night, whereas geese fed and spent a night in some unpredictable place and then moved on. They could be lured to certain spots using decoys and goose calls, but these devices were considered the paraphernalia of urban hunters and most farmers spurned them.

Late one evening a neighbour discovered that a flock of Canada geese had landed in a nearby lake to spend the night. By the time they saw him it was too late. After firing both barrels of his 12-gauge shotgun into the maze of wings as the geese took off he recovered thirteen birds from the water. In the absence of any means of preserving them he shared his bounty with his neighbours.

My career as a goose hunter began and ended on the same day. After plodding across the countryside all day in search of ducks and geese, I had given up and gone to the pasture to bring the cows in to be milked. Suddenly a large V-shaped wave of Canada geese approached out of the sunset. There was no place to hide. They saw me and split into two groups, one veering around each side. They were a long way off and were flying high, but realizing that it was the only opportunity I would have to get off a shot that day I pointed my ancient single-barrelled shotgun in their general direction and pulled the trigger. I had never shot at geese before, had no idea how much to lead them and didn't actually see a goose in my sights. To my amazement, one dropped out of the V, coasted slowly downward and landed a few yards away. It had a broken wing. I approached the helpless bird more with remorse than gratification. It may have been the beginning of the end of my appetite for killing birds for pleasure. Anyway, I retired from goose hunting with a perfect record: one shot and one goose.

### "Prairie Chickens"

The farm provided good habitat for sharp-tailed grouse or what were commonly called prairie chickens. The real prairie chicken is a different species, identifiable by the huge red air sacs and loud booming of the males during the mating season. By advertising its presence in this fashion, the prairie chicken was hunted almost to extinction, whereas its less ebullient cousin, the sharp-tailed grouse, thrived to the point that there was a hunting season for it in the fall. In reality, farmers took little notice of hunting seasons and harvested game birds on their property whenever they weren't laying eggs or raising young. The nearest law enforcement officer was thirty miles away and I never heard of a charge of illegal hunting being laid against anyone in the district.

It wasn't always necessary to hunt sharp-tailed grouse because they came into the stacks and granaries around the farmyard in winter in search of food. My father caught them with leghold traps placed on top of the stacks of oat sheaves next to the barn. When I looked out of my bedroom window one morning I saw several sitting in the trees beside the house. I roused my brother and he bagged two with a shotgun blast through the open window. We were prepared for the blast but it scared the wits out of our mother, who was asleep in the next room.

Prairie chickens habitually gathered in certain places to feed early in the morning and late in the afternoon. To hunt them in the morning it was necessary to get up before dawn and lie hidden in the wet grass in the cold fall air until they arrived. Their arrival was signalled by the sound of their cackle, much like that of domestic chickens when they are feeding (presumably the reason for their being called prairie chickens). Getting within shotgun range of prairie chickens could be a frustrating experience. They were easily alarmed and early discovery meant the end of the hunt. If the approach was successful, the usual practice was to stand up and get off two shots from a 10- or 12-gauge shotgun as they rose in flight. All but the most dedicated of hunters gave up the morning shoot for the one in the afternoon.

Despite their popularity as game birds, prairie chickens, like wild ducks, are overrated as food. They have tough, sinewy legs and there is little meat on them except for the red muscle on their breast that sustains their powerful flight pattern. As a table bird, the sharp-tailed grouse isn't worth lying in wet grass for on a cold fall morning or crawling across rough terrain at any time of day. It is a bird better suited for hunting than for eating.

### Saskatoons and Such

For many families, saskatoons were the main source of fruit in the winter diet. They resemble blueberries, but in a year when there is enough rain they are larger and more flavourful. They grew in the Assiniboine River valley on bushes about six feet tall and each year a day was put aside for picking them. It was an outing in which the whole family, including the dog, participated. We set off in the car early in the morning equipped with syrup pails to pick the berries in, milk buckets in which to accumulate them, straw hats, insect repellent and a basket containing lunch.

In a good year saskatoons could be picked in handfuls and the buckets were filled by early afternoon. In dry years the berries were small and woody and picking went on until it was time to go home and milk the cows. On average, we got enough berries for a month's supply of fresh fruit and fifty quarts of preserves. My recollection is that hot saskatoon pie augmented with ice cream was one of the best pies available, superior to blueberry and equalled only by hot mince pie at Christmas time.

Wild strawberries grew on a piece of moist grassland on the farm and when the grass was cut for hay in July the cutting bar on the mower ran red with their juice. The only trouble with them was that it took half an hour to pick a cupful. But what they lacked in size they made up for in flavour. It is high time that the genetic engineers transplanted the flavour genes of wild strawberries into commercial varieties, in which flavour has been sacrificed for a hard core that protects them from damage during shipping.

Wild chokecherries grew in clusters on medium-sized bushes and could be picked almost like grapes. Unfortunately, they have few other attributes. Their large seed comprises about half of the berry and their astringent taste is strong enough to repel even boys caught away from home at meal time. Some farm women prepared a credible jam from them by removing the seed and mashing the pulp, but it was not a job that appealed to many wives and certainly not to their children.

Pincherries are small, pink berries that grow in clusters on low bushes and were considered the elixir of wild fruits for making jelly. When properly prepared, pincherry jelly has a clear pink colour and delicate flavour that make it a treat reserved for special friends and relatives and then only on rare occasions. My only attempt at making pincherry jelly was a disaster. After picking the berries all one Saturday afternoon, I cooked them according to a procedure in a popular cookbook, testing them every few minutes to see if the gelling agent had taken effect. This went on and on, with no sign of success, until the contents of the pot had been reduced to a small volume of dark red liquid. When I poured it into a cup and left it to cool it developed the consistency of a solid rubber ball, and when I turned the cup upside down it fell out and bounced across the room in much the same manner.

The only fruit we grew for consumption in the winter was the citron, a round green melon covered with black filigree, the size of a five-pin bowling ball. My dictionary describes the citron as "a variety of watermelon, *Citrullus vulgaris citroides*, having fruit generally considered inedible and a hard rind used in flavouring." This description confirms my recollection of it, but in the absence of any alternative (which was most of the time) we ate it for dessert after cooking it in a syrup containing cloves to conceal its unpleasant flavour.

Some farm families, notably those in which there were several children, planted huge gardens and preserved a variety of vegetables for use in winter. In some instances the scale of the garden harvest rivalled that of the grain harvest. Most families, including ours, settled for root vegetables (potatoes, carrots, parsnips and turnips) that could be preserved by storing them in the root cellar. Items such as lettuce, tomatoes, spinach, radishes, green onions and cress disappeared from the table until the following summer.

### Ice Cellars

The problem of food spoilage in the summer could be alleviated to some degree by constructing an ice cellar. It consisted of a hole about six feet square and eight feet deep dug in a shady place and covered by a small house. In January or February, when the ice on a lake a couple of miles from our farm was at its thickest, my father, brother and I cut blocks about two feet square out of it using an ice saw, pulled them out of the water with tongs, loaded them onto a horse-drawn sleigh and transported them back to the farm. It wasn't easy work and even in the dead of winter we had no difficulty keeping warm. The blocks were stacked against the sides of the cellar with a mixture of sawdust and salt between them and then covered with a thick layer of sawdust. The door to the house opened onto steps that led down to the cellar floor. The ice cellar made it possible to have cold milk and fresh meat most of the summer.

Ice cellars were not without their hazards. When dug in acid soil through sulfide rock formations they were subject to accumulation of hydrogen sulfide, a gas comparable in toxicity to carbon monoxide. The door was always left open when entering the cellar. There was a newspaper account about a farmer who went to the ice cellar to get something his wife needed for supper and didn't return. His son was sent to find out what had happened to him and likewise didn't return. They were both found dead on the cellar floor.

### Farm Hockey

Most people are familiar with ice hockey and field hockey but few with farm hockey. It was a game played by farm boys during the Depression that has disappeared with the horse and the new prosperity. Somehow my family could afford to buy me a hockey stick but not a hockey puck. In a survey of possible substitutes on the farm I found that the most plentiful, inexpensive and functional alternative was frozen horse droppings. They could be propelled for long distances over packed snow and driven at high velocity toward the outline of a hockey net on the side of the barn. My peers on neighbouring farms had discovered the same thing and when they came to visit we had a competition to see who could shoot them the fastest and most accurately.

### The Winter School Van

By the late 1930s horse-drawn summer school vans had been replaced by motorized vehicles with a cab on the back, but in winter children still had to be transported to school using horse power. The winter van was a heavy canvas-covered vehicle mounted on a farm sleigh and drawn by two draft horses. It took an hour for the van to travel the three miles from our house to Kenton school. On the inside the van was similar to the summer van except that it had an oval, sheet-metal stove in the middle. When stoked with firewood stored beneath the seats, the stove was fully capable of keeping the van warm at any outside temperature, and it was often necessary to open the rear door to let the heat escape. At the front end there was a split door, the upper half containing a window through which the driver tried to keep track of the road ahead during a snowstorm, and the lower half a groove through which he manipulated the horses' reins (or "lines," as they were called).

Nowadays a snowstorm brings an announcement of a long list of school closures. When students went to school in a horse-drawn van it was rare for school to be cancelled because of a snowstorm. The increase in school closures is attributable to the poorer ability of motorized vehicles to cope with snow, the increased risk of accidents on crowded roads and the greater importance attached to getting to school on time. In those days school started whenever the van got there.

Modern methods of transportation have taken a lot of the fun out of getting to school. In addition to loss of the sociability that took place on the way to and from school, there was always the possibility that the van would upset as it made its way over a large snowbank. This possibility was a subject of conjecture, anticipation, excitement, and even hope. Sometimes it was disappointing when it didn't happen. When it did, its occupants piled out of the back door, pushed the van back into an upright position, got back in and went about recovering their books, lunch pails, winter coats and other paraphernalia. The van moved so close to the ground that when it upset it merely fell partway over onto the snow. The stove and its spring-loaded lid were bolted to the floor independently, making it virtually impossible for them to become separated. Today this mode of transportation would be buried under layers of safety regulations if it was allowed at all, but I can't recall any instance of a student being injured on the way to or from school. Nowadays the risk of injury comes after students get to school.

For teenagers the school van also served as a social venue on the way to and from school as well as on trips to social events held in town on winter evenings. The driver was nominally responsible for decorum during these nocturnal journeys, but his main concern was getting to town and back without upsetting the van rather than monitoring the social activity that took place on the way. To allow time for completing farm chores and making the slow journey into town, dances didn't start until nine o'clock in the evening and didn't end until at least one o'clock in the morning. The horses weren't encouraged to hurry on the trip home. I was in the habit of waking up at six in the morning (as I do now) but I recall my mother waking me after one such event and telling me that it was four o'clock in the afternoon.

## The Importance of Eating Breakfast

My morning routine began with getting dressed in my upstairs bedroom, going downstairs, washing my hands and face in the basin next to the kitchen stove and sitting down for breakfast, which consisted of hot cereal with milk, cream and brown sugar followed by toast and jam. It was prepared by a housekeeper we employed because of my mother's confinement to a wheel chair. She was a middle-aged woman with a strong build and matching personality.

When I sat down at the table one morning the housekeeper announced that she hadn't prepared my breakfast because the night before I had neglected to prepare the kindling needed to start the fire. By the time we finished discussing the matter the school van arrived and I had to get aboard it without breakfast. The morning seemed a bit longer than usual, but I survived it without undue difficulty.

On the way home from school another student told me she heard that our housekeeper had suffered a stroke during the day and had been taken to the hospital in Virden. This news was confirmed when I reached home. It turned out that when my mother learned I had been sent to school without breakfast, she unleashed her latent fury on the housekeeper with such effect that she suffered a brain hemorrhage from which she never fully recovered.

# Chapter 8

## *Closing the Farm Gates*

### Family Attrition

For my parents the clock was running down. My father was approaching his seventieth birthday and my mother divided her time between her bed and her wheelchair. My brother, who had been the mainstay of the farm for years, married and moved onto his own rental farm. Our older brother returned to take charge of the farm but the "family dynamics" weren't satisfactory. Our existence as a farm family was being rapidly eroded by attrition. The final agenda, however, was set by Mother Nature.

### The Harvest of '38

Putting the binder in working order for the fall harvest normally took about a week. The sickles that cut the grain had to be replaced or sharpened, the guards that protected them and parted the grain had to be aligned, the cutting bar rehabilitated, the knotter (the most temperamental part) adjusted so that it would tie the sheaves reliably, and all the moving parts had to be oiled or greased. Each year the canvasses that transported the grain across the binder table and up to the knotter needed sewing, patching and rivetting. This involved a trip to a repair shop in Virden. My father and an English contemporary always made this trip together. While the canvases were being repaired they renewed their taste for ale in the local beer parlor.

My oldest brother was refurbishing the binder one day in early August, making one adjustment after another and testing its effect by cutting some grain growing next to the farmyard. Between tests he left the binder and four-horse team standing unattended in front of the machine shed. When he suddenly emerged from the shed after a particularly long absence, a nervous gray gelding named Frank, which apparently had lapsed into an afternoon reverie in the warm sunshine, awoke with a start and lunged forward. This convinced the other three usually docile members of the team that they were in serious peril and they all charged across the farmyard, headed for the gate, pulling the binder behind them. By the time they got to the middle of the yard they were at full gallop. They didn't allow enough space for the eight-foot binder table to clear the pumphouse over the well and it was hit with such force that it was knocked off its foundation. The impact crumpled the steel drawbar that connected the horses to the binder and they broke free in two pairs, each harnessed to a doubletree, ran through the open gate into the road and disappeared behind the trees headed in a westerly direction.

I was dispatched on Dick to retrieve them. They had a head start, but Dick loved that kind of challenge and we caught up to them just as they approached the entrance to a pasture a half mile down the road. Evidently they anticipated that the gate would be open and by the time they realized their mistake it was too late. They ran through the gate and left it dangling from the gatepost.

Eventually the horses were rounded up, their harness repaired, another drawbar was obtained, the damaged guards were replaced and the pumphouse was put back on its foundation. By then it was about a week into the harvest season and there was worse to come.

## Hail Storms

Our last two years on the farm were marked by major hail storms. The one in 1937 swung from the west to the south and then the east, smashing the windows on three sides of the house in spite of our efforts to cushion the impact of the stones by holding pillows against them. The willows along the side of the road were stripped of leaves, the plants in the garden were shredded and the cows came in from the pasture with cuts on their backs. Many domestic fowl and wild birds caught away from shelter were killed. The subroof of an outbuilding a neighbour had under construction was perforated. The only redeeming feature of the storm was that it came after the crop had been taken off.

As if to correct this oversight, Mother Nature unleashed another storm in the summer of 1938, this one seemingly designed to cause maximum damage to the crop. It came on the first day of the harvest, when my brother and I were in the process of "opening up" a field of barley. This process entailed cutting the first swath in a clockwise direction so that the grain close to the fence was accessible to the cutting bar on the left side of the binder. In this round the sheaves were dropped in the standing grain and had to be removed by hand. Succeeding rounds were made in a counterclockwise direction so that the binder moved through the open corridor next to the standing grain and the sheaves were dropped on the stubble. There is a lucid portrayal of "opening up a field" in a photograph by Gary Evan Breithaupt that my wife gave me on the occasion of the first of my retirements. Its Ontario locale is revealed by the small six-foot binder and the three-horse team.

My brother and I had just completed this opening act of the harvest season when black clouds appeared in the western sky. Farmers learned to read cloud formations and this one prompted us to unhitch the horses immediately and head for the barn a half mile away. We were only part way there when the hail began to fall. We ran behind the galloping horses and forced them through the double doors of the barn without separating them. For the next twenty minutes we watched through a barn window as the hail destroyed the year's crop. Neither of us said so, but we both realized that we were also watching the final scene of our life as a farm family.

### The Sale

Much of the 1938-39 winter was spent sorting and repairing farm and household items, deciding what to keep, sell, or give away and what could be fitted into the small house in Lenore that my parents and I were scheduled to occupy in the spring. My oldest brother married and moved onto his wife's family farm. My other brother was rewarded for his years of work with some items of farm equipment, but his days on a farm also were coming to an end. When war broke out in the fall of 1939 he joined the air force and became an air frame mechanic. This training, along with the skills he had acquired on the farm, prepared him to make a living after the war as an automotive mechanic.

The sale was held early in the spring so that the farmers could make use of their acquisitions during the planting season. The implements were lined up in the yard and the auctioneer went down the row, reciting the traditional auctioneer's chant, as he sold them one by one. In a matter of a couple of hours the ownership of all our farm equipment and livestock and half of our household furnishings was transferred to somebody else. The only interest the buyers had in the cows and horses was in their capacity for work or production. When a prospective buyer questioned whether the mare called June was really only nine years old, I was able to testify that she was born on the morning of 9 June 1930. The animals were led away, taking with them all the individual personalities I had come to recognize during our long association. It was a "defining moment" for them as well as for me.

### Moving Dick

There was never any thought of selling Dick. We found a stable near our house in Lenore where he could be housed. It was located in a paddock where he could graze and exercise. Occasionally I took him on short, leisurely rides along the roads near town. He was in good shape for his age, so good in fact that the younger of my brothers took him to his farm to ride and haul his cart. I didn't see Dick again for a year, when I took the train to visit my brother and his wife, who lived some thirty miles away. My brother met me at the station with a horse and cart. At first I didn't recognize the horse as Dick. He had a dispirited appearance, his head hung down almost to the ground, his coat was shaggy and unkempt, his body thin and wasted. He was the product of neglect and a continuous ration of prairie hay. His future was highly predictable. He died shortly thereafter and his carcass was hauled away to a nearby valley where it was devoured by coyotes and stray dogs.

## Moving the Cat

The only other animal we salvaged from the farm was a gray and white cat that lived in the barn. We thought it would be a good thing to have a cat in the house for company and to keep down mice. I was assigned responsibility for transporting it to Lenore. Aware of the propensity of cats to return to familiar surroundings, I put it on the top shelf of a wooden cupboard, covered the screen door with heavy paper and transported it, along with some other items of furniture, the eight zigzag miles to Lenore on a hayrack.

It was apparent from the start that the cat was unhappy in its new environment. It stayed out of sight, ate sparingly and was unresponsive to human overtures. It was a barn cat. After a week or so it disappeared. Late that summer the tenants on our previous farm informed us that it had shown up, emaciated and disheveled, back in the barn.

## A Backward Glance

Quitting farming was the most defining of the many "defining moments" (as they are now called) in the lives of all of us. For my oldest brother it meant the end of tenant farming, which he hated, and the beginning of a period of relative peace and tranquillity spent with his wife and children on her family farm. For my other brother it brought an early end to farming as a vocation and the beginning of a life as a skilled craftsman. For me it provided an opportunity to spend my life pursuing the interest in the natural world that I had acquired as a child.

The sale was of greatest significance for my father, who had to watch most of the possessions he had acquired since coming to Canada being auctioned off. He had the misfortune to take up farming at the worst of times. His background in small-scale farming in England made it difficult for him to grasp the imperatives of large-scale farming in Canada. But the fact was that he was never interested in large-scale farming. He belonged to the tradition of English farmers who took pleasure in working the soil, nurturing the plants that grew in it, caring for the animals that ate the plants and savouring the natural environment that enabled all this to happen. There were occasions on winter evenings when we would suddenly realize that he had disappeared from the house. If someone unfamiliar with his habits asked where he had gone we would explain that he was out "straightening the straws." By that we meant that he had taken a lantern and gone to the barn to make sure that the animals were properly bedded down for the night.

In spite of all the difficulties he encountered as a farmer in Canada, his English penchant for "muddling through" enabled him to face them without bitterness or despair. There were times, after we had discussed

*The family's house in the town of Lenore.*

some impending crisis without being able to see any possible solution, when he would suddenly brighten up as if he had just found the answer and say "Well, we shall just have to put up with it."

In a sense he *had* found the answer. Even when the outlook was bleakest he was able to find satisfaction in his freedom to set his own agenda in a way that he never could have done if he had stayed in England. He looked forward to each day's work and planned it after he went to bed the night before. In one of the clearest picures of him in my memory banks he is shovelling a path from the house to the barn after an overnight snowfall, leaning on his shovel now and then to catch his breath and survey the beauty of the winter scene around him, then returning to his task with good humour. He chose to make peace with his environment rather than try to conquer it.

# Chapter 9

## *Life as a Town Boy*

### The Local Scene

Lenore hadn't changed much during the five years I had been away. There were still two grocery stores, two grain elevators, a hardware store, blacksmith shop, railroad station, post office, Presbyterian church and Odd Fellows hall. There were even a couple of new houses but these were offset by two new vacancies. The Red and White Store, which at one time sold a line of groceries, offered light meal service and served ice cream to customers seated on high-backed ironwork chairs, had become a hangout where candies and tobacco were sold and farmers gathered to discuss the weather, politics and the price of wheat.

Having spent the first fifteen years of my life on a farm, it took me a little time to adjust to the lifestyle in town. At four o'clock in the afternoon I still felt that I should gather the eggs and fetch the cows from the pasture. But any nostalgia I may have felt for the farm was dispelled by spending the summer holidays working as a hired man for a local farmer. It was a well run farm, the food was good, I had no complaints against my employer and I found it challenging to be given full responsibility for my work for the first time. But, while working as a hired man provided a house it didn't provide a home and I was glad to get back to school in the fall. Part of my earnings went to buy the .22 caliber Savage hunting rifle that is mounted over a door in my study. It hasn't been fired for fifty years.

### My Parents' Retirement

My father quickly fell into the easy life of the town, tending his garden in the morning, chatting with passersby as he sat in the shade of the carragana hedge next to our house and socializing with his friends in the blacksmith's shop in the afternoon. On winter evenings he sat by the stove in the living room and read the *Brandon Sun* or a book borrowed from the Manitoba Wheat Pool library. Despite her confinement to a wheelchair, during the day my mother found peace and satisfaction in supervising the affairs of the house and visiting with friends who dropped in for afternoon tea. In many ways it was the happiest period of her life in Canada.

*Front Street in Lenore (1994).*

### War Clouds

In the summer of 1939 it wasn't hail clouds but war clouds that farmers watched. Germany invaded Poland on 1 September, Britain and France declared war on Germany on 3 September and Canada joined them on 10 September. Canada deliberately delayed its declaration to indicate to the British government that, unlike World War I, it intended to command its own forces. These events didn't seem to have much personal significance for me. The French army was said to be the best in the world, the Maginot line to be impregnable and I had complete faith in the steadfastness of Britain and the British Empire. By the time the war ended six years later it had changed the lives of everyone in the community.

### The High School Teaching Venue

Enrollment in Lenore school had increased to 106 students, for an average of nearly ten in each of its eleven grades. There were about twenty-five students in the high school. I entered in grade ten, which occupied a row of seats between those for grades nine and eleven. This teaching venue came to mind recently when I read about the results of a study conducted in the United States from which it was concluded that the ideal high school should have 600 to 900 students and that students learn less in small schools. According to this view students who graduated from Lenore high school should have received a poorer education than those who graduated from large urban schools in the United States. The evidence is all to the contrary. For one thing, all the graduates of Lenore high school knew how to read and write. They had been taught an approach to reading that enabled them to learn new words on their own and they had experience in writing reports and essays. Some graduates of large American high schools who applied to university reported that they had never written an essay. The curriculum taught in the high schools in Manitoba, small and large, was designed to prepare students for the provincial exams that all students in the province had to pass in order to graduate. The graduation standards of American public schools, which are funded mainly from local taxes, reflect the economic condition of the community. This has caused many parents to abandon the public schools in favour of private institutions.

Despite its deficiencies, particularly in instructional equipment and teacher training, the teaching venue in the Lenore high school had certain advantages. If students in grade ten finished an assignment ahead of time they could listen in on the lesson being taught in grade eleven instead of combatting boredom by talking to the boy across the aisle or pulling the hair of the girl in front. To a considerable extent learning became a continuum that transcended the boundaries between grades. We were also encouraged to leave our seat to help a student in a lower grade who was having difficulty with a problem we had solved the year before. This combination of teaching and learning benefited both students and teacher. The teacher went from one grade to another, instructing one orally while a second was engaged in assigned reading and the third was doing a writing assignment. It all worked out better than one would expect from reading modern teaching manuals.

## The Curriculum

There was a strong emphasis on English grammar and literature. Four out of the nine courses taught in grade eleven were in English (grammar, poetry, drama and composition). This emphasis reflected the influence of the English system of classical education. It left room for five additional courses: algebra, geometry, chemistry, physics and history.

Science at the time was equated with technology and not considered to be a part of a liberal education. The teaching of chemistry and physics consisted mainly of assigned readings from those sections of the texts that most frequently had been the subject of questions on previous provincial examinations. The teacher had no special training in these subjects and could give no explanation of their relevance to things that affected our lives, let alone the importance of science as a method of inquiry into the nature of the world in which we lived. The requirement for rote learning dulled my interest in chemistry and physics. The biological sciences (which were to become my professional vocation) were ignored altogether.

Science rose from near the bottom of my list of preferred subjects in high school to near the top when I encountered informed university teachers who explained many of the things I had observed in my natural environment as I was growing up. The emergence of science as an essential component of a liberal education is perhaps the most important change that has taken place in the high school curriculum since that time.

History was the only subject in high school that I actively disliked and it was for much the same reason that I disliked science. It was taught as a compendium of the names and dates of battles between the English and their various protagonists over the years, with no explanation of what the battles were about. We learned nothing about who our ancestors were, why they came to Canada, what happened to them after they arrived or how we, their children and grandchildren, came to be sitting in the same high school room in rural Manitoba. As I had for science, I later developed a liking for history, but only after reading it on my own.

There were three courses in history, one in each high school grade. They were called Canadian history, English history and world history. In reality they dealt, respectively, with the history of the English in Canada, in England and in the rest of the world. The course called Canadian history told of the defeat of the Natives in the hinterlands of Ontario, the French transgressors at the battle of Quebec and the American invaders at Queenston Heights. No attempt was made to place these events in context with the major geopolitical upheavals that were taking place at the time, such as the colonization of the Western Hemisphere by Europeans and of Canada by the English and French or the Napoleonic wars in Europe that spawned the War of 1812 between Canada and the United States. There was also no description of the impact of colonization on the indigenous peoples who inhabited these territories.

The account of French-Canadian history was limited to Cartier's landing on the banks of the Saint Lawrence River in 1634 and the defeat of the French on the Plains of Abraham in 1759. It wasn't pointed out that the French were the first settlers in Canada, that they had developed a distinct culture over the succeeding 300 years, or that the battle of 1759 was part of an ongoing struggle over which European power was going to dominate North America. Nor was there any account of how the French and English cultures were brought together to form a country. The importance of such an understanding became apparent fifty years later when the possibility arose that Canada would come apart at its cultural seams. The teaching of Canadian history in high schools failed miserably to meet its responsibility to prepare students to deal with the political future of Canada.

No credence was given to the possibility that Native Canadians even had a history. Indeed, there was ambiguity about whether Canada had a history it could call its own. In his famous report to the British government on the cause of the 1837 rebellions in Canada, Lord Durham described Canada as a country without a history. This perception persisted in the schools of English Canada until after World War II when the returning veterans demanded a Canadian identity. Their attitude was resented by the entrenched British establishment. When, as a politically awakening high

*Remains of the Lenore school (1996).*

school student, I complained about the British imperial presence in Canada my father accused me of being a Nazi sympathizer. In the years that followed it became apparent that neither the French Canadians nor the aboriginal peoples had ever lost their awareness of their own history.

The need for better teaching in the schools of Manitoba was addressed following World War II. Part of the solution called for hiring teachers with university training in the disciplines they were responsible for teaching. This couldn't be done in small school districts and many schools had to close, including the one in Lenore in 1979.

### School Discipline

Punishment for misdemeanors in the primary grades took such conventional forms as having to stand in a corner of the room for twenty minutes, stay in the room at recess or write "I must not..." a hundred times on the blackboard. In the higher grades, punishment for serious infractions sometimes was meted out in the form of "the strap," a piece of leather two inches wide that was brought down several times on the palm of the misceant's hand. The palm of most of the boys was protected by calluses from farm work, but sometimes the blows fell on the wrist where they caused reddening and swelling. The strap was administered only by male teachers. There was a feeling that strapping a student would compromise the image of female teachers as nurturers of children. When prescribed by a female teacher it was administered by the principal, who was invariably male.The school district supplied regulation straps that teachers kept at the back of the drawer in their desk where they were not blatantly conspicuous but could be found if a student wanted to know whether a teacher really had one. The counterpart of the strap at home was the razor strop, used to sharpen straight razors, and when some parents learned that their child had "got the strap" at school the punishment was reinforced at home.

My only encounter with the strap came as the result of playing soccer with another boy in a classroom at noon break. Play ended when the ball bounced through a window. We were told that we would have to pay for a new window. That meant telling our parents and that was something I wasn't prepared to do. When I failed to produce any money after a week, it was decided that the other student's parents would pay the $5 and I would get the strap. It was a good bargain as far as I was concerned. Like a lot of other things, the strap turned out to be more traumatic in prospect than in reality. I had thick calluses on my hands and my main reaction to the four blows was one of surprise at how little trauma they produced (certainly less than facing up to my parents). Getting the strap also enhanced my image among my peers, who had come to regard me as a little too studious and square.

Using the strap was not always risk free for the teacher. A man who attempted to strap a husky farm boy wound up under his desk in front of the class. The boy was expelled from school, but he was reinstated when the fathers in the community let it be known they thought he had displayed a promising sign of early manhood. Robust teachers sometimes used more strenuous methods of punishment. A former high school principal would take a rebellious student out onto the second floor fire escape and hurl him down the galvanized chute that led to a pile of gravel at the bottom. At noon the chute was used for play and sometimes as a weapon. A girl who had a grievance against her older brother got even by sticking a small nail through a hole in the bottom of the chute as he was sliding down.

The high school principal was too dignified to engage in physical punishment except under extreme circumstances, but there were times when he felt it was necessary in order to preserve an image of authority. One such occasion arose after he and some of the students (including me) had left the room to practice a skit for the Christmas concert. Soon after we returned it became apparent from the principal's demeanor that something untoward had happened in our absence. It turned out that someone had placed a tack on his chair and when he sat down it had the desired effect.

He demanded to know who had done it. That was a bad tactic because it flew in the face of the student ethic that nobody squealed on anybody else. When nobody did, he took the strap out of his drawer and laid it on top of his desk. When no one yielded to this threat he ordered all the students who were present in the room to line up and he went down the row, administering four blows of the strap on each upturned palm. Some of the girls looked a little pale.

When he had finished he wiped his forehead and declared, quite unconvincingly, that he had never had so much fun in his life. Then he asked again if the student who had committed the offence would now stand up. The culprit did. He was a good student who went on to a prominent professional career. When asked why he didn't own up to it in the first place he replied that the students had agreed he would act on their behalf. It was a disastrous public relations episode for the principal. He was a competent and dedicated teacher with a deep interest in the welfare of his students and I owe a debt of gratitude to him for encouraging me to go on to university. These qualities were overshadowed in the memory of his former students by an ill-advised action taken one day. On a visit to the community a half century later I found that "the day everybody got the strap" was still firmly imbedded in the memory of all those who had been present in the school at the time. Even those who were students in other rooms remembered hearing the sound of the blows as it echoed through the halls. I also learned that the boy who confessed to putting the tack on the chair was not, in fact, the one who originally had put it there. That had been done by a girl and he had put it back when it fell off. The boy, in an act of chivalry, declined to identify the girl, who seems destined to remain anonymous.

I was the beneficiary of a more tempered response to an unintended assault on the principal of Kenton high school. In the course of a water fight at noon hour, I released a mouthful of water in the direction of a student protagonist through an open school window. A gust of wind caught and propelled it around the corner of the building directly into the face of the principal, who was returning from lunch. I waited three days for the ax to fall before he informed me he had finally decided on a suitable punishment. I was required to write a 500-word essay on water.

### High School Sports

There were just enough boys in the three grades in high school (if they all showed up) to make up a soccer or a softball team, but as it takes two teams to play these games we invited the girls to join in. The ones who accepted, of course, were the ones who were confident they could compete with the boys. When I encountered one of them recently (by which time she had spent a career working for a business firm in Winnipeg) I reminded her how she had laughed after driving a ball into my crotch during a softball game. She laughed again. Sometimes the principal arranged for transportation to another school for a soccer match and sometimes we won. The climactic athletic event of the year was a field day held at Kenton in June, where students from all the schools in the district competed for honours.

Ice curling and hockey, of course, were the main winter sports. The high school boys who lived in town stopped at the ice rink on their way home nearly every afternoon to "shoot a few rocks," and by the time the spring bonspiel came around they were able to compete fairly well with the veteran curlers. Curling was a popular evening sport among both men and women. Girls opted for skating on the open-air rink and boys for hockey. The boys couldn't afford regulation equipment and resorted to a variety of substitutes. In place of shin pads I wore two old copies of Eaton's catalogue tied around my legs with shoe laces.

### A New Perception of Girls

At some point in grade ten I came to the realization that I had been mistaken about the girl who sat across the aisle. She was not, after all, the thin, gangly, silly girl I thought she was, but a shapely, lithesome creature who moved with the grace and ease of a Hollywood movie star. She exuded an aura of helplessness that called for assistance with carrying her books home from school and repairing any of her belongings that required rehabilitation. Somewhere I have a decorative part of her shoe that she gave me as a souvenir after I reattached the heel. I still hope to have the opportunity to return it to her.

It is a cruel fact of nature that boys are moved to make their first social overtures to girls at an age when they are at their clumsiest. There was no better example than the efforts of farm boys to take their first dance steps on feet that had never known anything other than work boots. To make matters worse, the girls were two years farther down the road to maturity. Dances were held in the Odd Fellows hall to mostly traditional Scottish music provided by local performers. I will be eternally grateful to a girl, now deceased, who said to me after I had flattened her toes during a waltz "Gee, you're gettin' along good at dancin'."

At about that time the doctor stopped at our house on one of his impromptu visits to see how we were getting along. My mother told him that she was all right but that I was having trouble sleeping. His immediate question was "Does he have a girl?" He was on the right track but he missed the exact diagnosis. The trouble was that I didn't have a girl. The girl I didn't have was the object of other attentions, including those of the sons of two merchants who had access to their father's car on Saturday night and an entertainment allowance to boot. All I could offer her was a walk or a ride on my bicycle. I caught the faint smile at the edges of my mother's mouth the first time I told her I was going for a walk with a girl. In the end none of these liaisons amounted to anything, but if I ever see her again I'll render her that Bogart salute "Here's looking at you, kid."

### The Swimming Hole

It was hard to find a swimming hole in summer on the Canadian Prairies. The only body of water big enough to submerge in within a convenient distance from town was a small pool at the outflow from a culvert that ran under a road, and then only for a couple of days after a rain. The infrequency of rains at the time made swimming trunks a poor investment. When I went to the pool with two friends one hot Saturday afternoon we found that it was already occupied by three girls. We sat beside their clothes on the bank for two hours watching them paddle around, submerged up to their necks, and listening to their entreaties to leave. It was the most entertaining afternoon of the summer.

### Fly Traps

There was lots of horse manure around town for flies to lay their eggs in and they gathered in a swarm on our screen door, waiting for an opportunity to get to the food they could smell inside. I was interested in any possible source of income and decided to test the market for a fly trap I had seen the plans for in a magazine. It was constructed of a screen cage mounted on top of a tobacco can filled with a mixture of syrup and milk to attract the flies. They entered holes in the side of the can and migrated upward into the cage through a screen cone with an opening at the top that was too small to enable them to find their way back. By the end of a hot summer day two or three inches of flies had accumulated in the bottom of the cage.

Women who came to visit my mother were impressed with the number of flies in the cage hanging beside the door (I didn't empty it often) and they contracted with me for a cage in exchange for twenty-five cents. That was the price of a ticket to the movie in the Odd Fellows hall on Saturday night. What they didn't realize was that the fermented mixture of syrup and milk in the can attracted flies from all over the neighbourhood that otherwise wouldn't have come near their house.

### Cigarettes

The advent of radio in the late 1930s brought a deluge of cigarette advertisements ("I'd walk a mile for a Camel," "Lucky Strike means fine tobacco"). "Tailor-made" cigarettes were associated with the well to do; ordinary folk bought a package of loose tobacco, a pack of cigarette papers and rolled their own. "Rolling your own" was a skill easily mastered, but people who were unusually clumsy bought a roller that produced a reasonable facsimile of a tailor-made cigarette.

Most high school boys experimented with cigarettes. There was no evidence at the time that smoking was injurious to health, though I recall seeing a dense ball of smoke disappear into a man's mouth one day and wondering what happened to it. High school boys couldn't afford to buy tobacco, let alone tailor-made cigarettes or a roller, so we raided the ash trays in the local "euchre parlor" and used the contents of the butts to roll new cigarettes. We found that it took an average of seven butts to make one cigarette. There were no filters on cigarettes in those days. A riddle at the time asked how many cigarettes you could make from forty-nine butts. The answer was eight, when you counted the one produced by smoking the first seven.

There was no stigma attached to smoking by adults (indeed, it was considered manly) but teenagers were discouraged from smoking on the dubious grounds that it might stunt their growth. As a teenager on the farm I kept a package of tobacco hidden in the hayloft (though I never smoked there) and after working for a summer as a hired man I smoked openly. When I graduated from high school the principal told a friend (who told me) that I was the only student he had known who smoked and did well in school. That may have been true, but it didn't mean that smoking was a cause of not doing well. In any event, I never smoked heavily because of an allergy to inhaled smoke that manifested itself in sharp chest pains, probably the result of spasms of the heart muscle. Years later an article appeared in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* written by a physician in Detroit who described the identical symptoms in twenty patients who had what he called "smoker's syndrome."

## Matching for Chocolate Bars

It was a custom among high school boys who had a nickel to buy a chocolate bar to match another boy on a double-or-nothing basis. This practice was a manifestation of the "chicken" psychology prevalent among adolescent males. One boy would flip his nickel in the air, catch it in one hand, slap it down on the back of his other hand and say either "you come to me" or "I'll go to you." That meant that the other boy had to match your nickel, head or tail, or you had to match his.

After going to the grocery store bearing a nickel to buy a chocolate bar one evening I was challenged to a match by another student. We flipped our nickels and I let him make the call. He did, handed me his nickel and challenged me to give him a chance to recover it. We matched again with the same result. That was his last nickel, but a customer who was watching challenged me to another match, after which he likewise handed me his nickel. Over the next two hours various other townspeople came into the store and, after being told of my success by the proprietor, issued additional challenges. I went home with twelve chocolate bars and my original nickel. The irony of this episode was that it was the first time I had engaged in the matching procedure and didn't know exactly how it worked. I had to conceal my ignorance by letting my opponent call the shot and relying on his reaction to tell who had won. I haven't calculated the odds against winning the random flip of a coin twelve times in a row, but this experience has made me skeptical ever since about claims for products based on a mere 95 percent probability that their effects were not due to chance. Such probabilities account for the fact that a lot of the "breakthroughs" reported in the media are never heard of again.

## Halloween

As soon as it was dark on Halloween night the children in primary school and some in the secondary grades made the traditional "trick or treat" round of the houses in town. There was no thought of escorting them for safety reasons as there is now, but parents accompanied preschool children on their own round of visits to prevent them from getting lost. The older boys, meanwhile, were gathering in the shadows and plotting their agenda.

Toppling the outhouses was as much a Halloween tradition as trick or treating. These tall, narrow, unstately structures were easily pushed over by two or three determined teenage boys. They were almost as easily set upright again in the morning and this service was often rendered by the perpetrators. There were stories about outhouses that were saved from being overturned at the last moment by a female shriek from inside, but in my lengthy experience with these nocturnal forays I never encountered a verifying case. Women were too clever to be caught in an outdoor privy on Halloween night. Still, it was a bad night for incontinent females.

Each year the boys in high school felt challenged to carry out some novel prank. Sometimes it involved a late night visit to a farm. When Uncle Bob resumed his ploughing on the morning after Halloween he found that his two-furrowed plough no longer turned the soil properly. Eventually he figured out that the front and rear shares had been interchanged, a transaction that requires heavy tools and a good deal of perseverance. His reaction was one of commendation for a harmless trick well executed.

Older boys sometimes undertook more sophisticated operations. A wagon loaded with bags of wheat that a farmer had left in his yard overnight was unloaded, disassembled, reassembled on the roof of a shed and the bags put back in place. It was not a sight to be seen first thing in the morning after a night of intemperate socializing.

Some Halloween adventures turned out to be more exciting than anticipated. One year we undertook to remove some chickens from a nearby farm and release them in the school basement. When we got to the farm the occupants were away and we had no difficulty capturing a few chickens in the darkness of the chicken house. We were carrying them along the road back to town when we met the farmer's wife coming the other way. She was a haughty, dark-complexioned woman with features that suggested Indian blood and there was a rumour that she carried a tomahawk hidden under her clothes. All would have gone well had it not been for the fact that, just as she and I passed each other, a chicken concealed under my arm let out a loud squawk. She looked me straight in the eyes for a moment and then continued on her way back to the farm.

When she got there and discovered that some of her chickens were missing she marched back to town in search of them. By the time she arrived we had released the chickens in the school basement and taken refuge in our various safe havens. I watched through a crack in the wall of the loft over the livery stable as she strode up and down the road looking for me. Eventually she gave up and went back home. When school opened the next morning the chickens were returned to the farm and that was the last I heard of this episode, but from then on I was careful to avoid her, not being fully reassured about the tomahawk.

It was a Halloween tradition to remove one of the obsolete horse-drawn summer vans from the storage shed on the school grounds, push it up the steps of the school and position it against the front door so that it couldn't be opened the following morning. When I was in grade eleven I was selected to head the task force charged with this responsibility.

The van was heavy and we had barely enough manpower to push it up the steps of the school. But our main concern lay with the town constable, a gruff old Scot who lived directly across the road. I instituted all the precautions I could think of to avoid detection. Lookouts were posted beside his house and everyone was admonished not to talk, make any noise or use any lights. We were in the midst of pushing the van up the steps when suddenly someone standing beside me turned on a flashlight. I slapped my hand over the end and ordered him to "turn the damn thing off." Then I recognized the unmistakable features of the town constable. How long he had been a member of the group on that dark night I have no idea, but following my command he sat down and laughed for about five minutes then helped us push the van up the steps.

We kept informed of social relationships in town and they sometimes figured in Halloween pranks. An attractive and vivacious woman lived with her older husband in a house next to the manse, which was inhabited by a bachelor minister. She was frequently seen going over to his house bearing hot soup and home cooked food. Some people thought that she took him more hot soup than he really needed. In any event, she made the mistake of taking him some on Halloween night. We rallied enough high school manpower to move several pieces of heavy farm machinery from the implement dealer's property to the manse, where they were placed firmly against the front and back doors. It was probably the only night she ever spent at the minister's house.

## Local Vernacular

Every community had one or two residents who added a new dimension to the local vernacular. One such person in the Lenore district was a small man with a reputation for a ferocious temper who operated a farm not far from town. He had fathered two sons late in life and at an early age they gave every indication of emulating their father. I visited his farm one day and found him, as usual, lying underneath his tractor making repairs. His sons were playing with his tools beside the tractor when, on some impulse, one of them picked up a hammer and brought it down across his father's fingers, which were wrapped around the sharp centre rim of one of the tractor's steel wheels.

When I witnessed this assault I expected an immediate explosion but instead there was a long period of silence. Finally a low guttural sound began to emanate from beneath the tractor. It increased in volume and verse to become a virtual symphony of profanity, starting with "Oh, dog-hearted God!" and going on to appeals to "Gentle Jesus." Over the years he became recognized as the leading author of novel profanity in the community. It wasn't a trivial contribution. As Mark Twain pointed out, there are times when profanity affords a relief denied even to prayer. There are also times when even profanity fails to provide relief. George Bernard Shaw told a story about a man, noted for his profanity, whose wagon overturned and sent all his belongings rolling down a river bank into the water. After surveying the scene in silence for a few minutes he said calmly "I cannot do justice to this situation."

### Rabbit Hunting

I occasionally hunted jack rabbits in winter as a small source of income. The frozen carcasses were boxed up and shipped to a processor in Winnipeg who sold the pelts to furriers and the rest to mink and fox farmers. The best time to hunt rabbits was after an early spring thaw that melted the snow and left their white winter coats plainly visible against the black soil.

Sometimes I went rabbit hunting with another student in grade ten and by the end of one winter we had accumulated a substantial number of frozen carcasses, which we shipped to the processor in his name. He was not a very good shot and I had bagged most of the animals, but I agreed to an even split of the bounty. I heard nothing from him about the shipment for a long time and whenever I asked him about it he said that he hadn't heard from the buyer. I noticed that he didn't seem particularly upset over it. Eventually this explanation became implausible and the real one came to light in the person of his new girlfriend. It was a case of love over friendship. I thought of my erstwhile friend when I read Mark Twain's story about a man who sold him a lame horse. He said that if he happened to be in town on the day of that man's funeral he would put aside all other forms of entertainment in order to attend. My friend died an early death and I lived too far away to attend his funeral for any reason.

### Ice Curling

In winter the curling rink was the centre of social activity in the town. It had a large waiting room heated by a wood-burning stove where young and old gathered in the evening to meet friends, exchange the news and discuss the weather. The room had a large spectators' window for keeping track of what was happening on the ice. There was no artificial ice and the condition of the natural ice changed with the weather, sharp and crisp when it was cold, soft and sluggish when it was mild. "Reading the ice" was a constant challenge. A rock that would stop in front of the house one day would sail through it the next.

Ice curling is a slow game that some people find fascinating and others find insufferably dull. In that respect it is like baseball, which nobody should go to see who doesn't understand the game or like hotdogs and beer. Shelby Foote, an American historian and avid fan of baseball, observed that the best time at a baseball game was when nothing was happening on the field. That gave the fans an opportunity to discuss strategy, whether the pitcher should walk the batter or pitch him low inside, whether the manager should pull the infield in to cut off a possible run or leave it deep and go for a double play. So it is with ice curling. The spectators at the rink in Lenore followed the progress of a match through the window in the comfort of the waiting room, debating whether the skip should call for a draw to the centre of the ring through a small opening between the opponent's rocks, raise a friendly rock into the four-foot circle or go for a multiple knockout.

Like a lot of other things, ice curling isn't what it used to be. That's because winning, rather than skill and entertainment, has become the object of the game. The modern strategy calls for keeping the ice clear of the opponents' rocks and then either scoring a single point with last rock or throwing it through the house to retain last rock on the following end. Every shot is predictable and the outcome is usually decided about halfway through the match, after which the rink with the lead protects it by running off the opponents' rocks one at a time. As in baseball, the fans have been left out of the game. Happily, there have been recent changes in the rules of the game to prevent this style of play.

The winter bonspiel at Lenore had some exciting moments both on and off the ice. One year there was an early thaw that left the ice soft, unresponsive and in some places covered with water. Such conditions are conducive to ill-tempered play. Two skips became embroiled in a dispute that ended in their rolling around on the ice at the home end of the rink in front of the spectators' window. One man was unusually large around the middle and the other was unusually tall. The fat man would have prevailed except that every time he got on top of his protagonist his girth caused him to roll off, producing a splash as he landed in the water on the ice. I was reminded of this scene many years later when I witnessed two seals mating on the ice of the Arctic Ocean.

### Boots

We had always kept a family dog and after moving to Lenore my father adopted a stray dog for companionship. His big white feet prompted a friend to name him Boots. He was a friendly animal and we went on frequent walks and hunting expeditions together. When I came home from school for lunch one day I found him, as usual, lying in the sun beside the woodpile. But when I bent over and patted him on the back he failed to respond and I finally realized that he was dead. He had been run over by a car and left in the street in front of our house. My father had picked him up and lain him in his favorite place in the sun.

There was a dark side to the attitude of some older boys toward animals.

When an elderly neighbour needed to have her ailing dog put down, a classmate of mine (the same one who stole my rabbit money) was eager to oblige. He took the dog to a bluff near town and shot it. I declined his invitation to witness the execution. When I lived on the farm our neighbour's teenage son saw a dog walking across a field on his father's farm one day and shot it just to relieve his boredom. It belonged to a bachelor farmer who had no family and had acquired the dog for company. When the boy told me what he had done I passed the information on to my mother. She had heard that the farmer had lost his dog but, true to form, she expressed more sympathy for the dog than for its owner.

# Chapter 10

## *Morbidity, Mortality and Mayhem*

### The State of the Public Health

For a small community there were a lot of illnesses, injuries and early deaths. Farming has long been associated with a high rate of injuries and before the advent of antibiotics pneumonia, pleurisy, "blood poisoning," "abscesses," enteritis and other bacterial diseases were frequent causes of morbidity and mortality. Surgery always carried a risk of infection. Further, there were few drugs that were effective against metabolic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and cancer. Vaccines had been developed for the prevention of small pox and diphtheria but not for poliomyelitis and encephalitis. The result of all this was a high frequency of serious illnesses and deaths, especially among children.

It was not expected, as it is now, that all healthy newborns would survive. In a large family there were frequently one or two infant deaths. They were regarded as "normal deaths" and there was often no public disclosure of the cause if, in fact, it was known. A six-month-old infant who lived across the street from us died suddenly. The cause of death was never divulged, even to the parents, and they made no effort to find out. Infant deaths were accepted as a normal risk of having children.

For a high school with only about ten students in the graduating class each year there were a large number of early deaths from cancer. Two members of my graduating class and one from the previous class died of cancer before the age of thirty. There was a curious stigma attached to death from cancer, which was perceived as a disease visited on its victims as punishment for some undisclosed sins, and the victim's family didn't talk about it openly.

Poliomyelitis and equine encephalitis recurred nearly every summer. The young man who picked me up and took me home when I got lost on my first day of school contracted polio and was crippled for the rest of his life. The daughter of the postmaster and a farm boy my age died of encephalitis. A former schoolmate at Kenton died of pneumonia and two others were killed in road accidents, all before the age of twenty. A girl who "got in trouble" (as the saying went) committed suicide. A farmer's wife died of botulism from eating improperly canned homegrown beans. World War II began taking its toll of community youths even before they got into action. One graduate of the high school was killed during an air force training exercise in Canada and another in the crash of a military plane in England. Two of my classmates at Kenton school were killed in separate accidents in the army.

### The Municipal Doctor

The doctor served the community with great dedication and much personal sacrifice. In winter he travelled in a closed cutter drawn by a team of fast, light horses (called "drivers") from his home in Kenton to remote farmsteads over roads frequently clogged with snow and at temperatures below zero Fahrenheit. In summer his Ford car was a familiar sight as it passed by on the main road in front of our house. Periodically he stopped to inquire about my mother's arthritis, any other health problems in the family and how I was doing at school. He didn't charge for these impromptu visits and he didn't always get paid for those made in response to a summons. Some former patients took him farm produce when they went to shop in Kenton, where he lived with his wife and two children in a modest upstairs apartment over a store. His son wore patches on the knees of his pants just as I did.

Notwithstanding, his services didn't satisfy everybody. One summer he took a two-week vacation with his family while his practice was covered by the physician in Hamiota. During his absence a senior student in Kenton high school came down with pneumonia and, despite being hospitalized, died a couple of days after the doctor returned. He was a son of the garage owner, who accused the doctor of negligence and refused to continue servicing his car. Thereafter the doctor had to take his car to Harding, several miles away, when it needed service. This allegation wasn't shared by most people in the community, but it had a dispiriting effect on the doctor and was probably a factor in his decision to leave the district after his son finished high school. He took a post in a northern community where, upon his retirement, he was cited for outstanding public service.

### The Doctor's Son

The doctor's son was my age and when I entered the school in Kenton we became classmates. He was not a chip off the old block. He looked down on farm boys from what he perceived to be his superior social position in the community. This attitude didn't sit well with his rural peers, who regarded him as a smart-aleck town kid. I came to share this opinion of him after he spent a weekend at our house at a time when such visits were in vogue. His father probably pushed him into it in the hope that it would make his son more humble.

At a gathering of high school boys on the main street of Kenton after school one day he got into a controversy with the other boys, who decided to express their displeasure with him by pelting him with snowballs. He was a fast runner and he sprinted across the street, over the railroad tracks and along a path on the other side. By then he was out of my normal range, but having nursed a snowball until it was as much ice as snow, I let it fly with all my strength toward a spot some ten yards ahead of where he was running. I watched, fascinated, as it intersected his head at exactly that spot. It was an experience gratifying enough to have remained in my memory banks ever since.

He wasn't the brightest student in his high school class but he entered the premedical program at the University of Manitoba when he graduated. His sister, who was a year younger and a notch brighter, settled for nursing, a profession considered more suitable for women. Several years later there was a legislative inquiry into the admission practices of the Faculty of Medicine which revealed that there were quotas on various categories of applicants. The freshman class of twenty students provided for one applicant of Jewish descent, one of Ukrainian ancestry, four females and a special portal for the sons of doctors.

### Tonsillectomy

The tonsils and appendix were regarded as vestigial organs that had no useful purpose (as if God had loused up), served only as a potential source of infection and should be removed. The Darwinian argument that if they were a risk to survival they would have been removed by natural selection long ago was not taken seriously (nor was Darwin). Nowadays neither organ is removed except under unusual circumstances.

Following a couple of episodes of sore throat and inflamed tonsils during the winter that I was seven, the doctor scheduled me for a tonsillectomy the following summer. After several weeks of anxious anticipation, he arrived at the house one morning to perform the operation. As soon as he entered the door I became aware of an odour more noxious than any I had ever encountered, even on the farm. As an adult I was to become familiar with it as the smell of diethyl ether. I was lain on the dining room table, a gauze mask was placed over my nose and mouth and ether was sloshed onto it from a metal can. While this was going on, my father sat in the corner of the room smoking his pipe and talking to the doctor. Neither he nor, obviously, the doctor realized that diethyl ether is an extremely flammable chemical, which is is now authorized for laboratory use only under a hood vented directly to the outdoors. My mother, as usual, was watching out for my welfare and she persuaded my father to join her in the kitchen.

The doctor urged me to blow the ether away, a strategy cunningly designed to increase its intake in my next breath. I began to see a light in the distance that got brighter and brighter, like the headlight of an approaching train, until there was a final bright flash and I woke up with a sore throat.

### Appendectomy

The death of a boy in another community from a ruptured appendix prompted the doctor to diagnosis a virtual epidemic of appendicitis in the district. My brother's appendix was summarily removed at the hospital in Virden in the middle of the harvest season. At that time patients were kept in bed for ten days after the operation to reduce the risk of a ruptured incision, in contrast to the modern practice of getting them up the next day to reduce the formation of scar tissue.

On one of his impromptu stops at our house the doctor had me lie on my back while he applied pressure with his fingers to the lower right quadrant of my abdomen. He had a reputation for being a thorough but not a gentle examiner. He kept applying more and more pressure and asking me if it hurt until eventually, of course, it did. Thereupon he scheduled me into the hospital at Hamiota at the end of the school year. That involved another encounter with diethyl ether, but by that time the doctor's technique for administering it had improved and I was better prepared for it mentally. After the standard ten days in the hospital I was allowed to go home. I walked around in a stooped position from adhesions for another ten days and then followed the doctor's advice to avoid strenuous work for the rest of the summer. It was the best summer I ever spent on a farm.

Antibiotics have greatly reduced the risk of death from a ruptured appendix, but its consequences are still so severe that acute appendicitis remains the most common cause of abdominal surgery next to hernia. I have no criticism of the doctor's aggressive response to my alleged symptoms, in spite of serious doubt that I ever had an infected appendix. Patients in those days were not encouraged to think they had any more right to question the doctor than they did to question God.

### Dentistry

My first visit to a dentist came at the age of seventeen, when I developed a cavity in each of my lower molars. Without any hesitation or explanation he extracted both of them. They are the only teeth I've ever lost. Dentists at the time assumed that, sooner or later, you were going to lose your teeth anyway and they might as well get on with it. Today such extractions would be a basis for a malpractice suit if not for justifiable homicide.

### Pneumonia

When I was sixteen I contracted pneumonia and spent a month in bed. Pneumonia may have been "the old man's friend" but it was no friend to a boy. I was reportedly the first patient in the district to be treated for pneumonia with a sulfa drug. Sulfas, the forerunners of modern antibiotics, are not very effective antipneumococcal agents and it is doubtful that it did any good, but it buoyed my spirits to know that something was being done, just as the spirits of Londoners at the time were buoyed by the sound of antiaircraft batteries blasting away at invisible German targets during the blitz.

I was also plied with such traditional palliatives as oatmeal cereal for breakfast and hot chicken soup for lunch. Because my mother was bedridden, the soup was brought to our house by an elderly lady who lived across the street. I still think of her kindness whenever I pass the house where she lived. She was an avowed Conservative and I was perplexed by the fact that someone of that political persuasion could also be compassionate. For whatever reason, my health began to improve with the arrival of spring, though the debilitating effect of the illness lasted for a long time as I found when I tried to run to catch a ball and fell on my face instead. Penicillin, which was just being developed for the treatment of war wounds, would have had me up and going in a week.

### "Summer Flu"

Every summer brought two or three episodes of vomiting and diarrhea. They were regarded as an inevitable accompaniment of summer, much as colds were regarded as an unavoidable companion of winter. They were attributed to "summer flu," but in all probability were caused by the growth of Salmonella bacteria in unrefrigerated food during the warm weather.

### Nosebleeds

As a teenager I was subject to winter nosebleeds that sometimes went on until it was necessary to call the doctor. He would get out a roll of gauze and ram half of it into each nostril with a pair of pointed tweezers, admonishing me not to complain when they scraped my nasal passages. He was not trained for microsurgery; however, he got the bleeding stopped and after a few days he would come back to remove the gauze. I was reminded of those episodes when I read explorers' accounts of nosebleeds among Eskimos in the winter, a problem that has since been attributed to a long blood clotting time caused by their high intake of seal, whale and fish oils. Clearly, that was not the cause of mine.

### Childhood Diseases

Measles and chicken pox were so common that those who escaped them felt they had been deprived of a normal childhood. It is still a mystery to me how I contracted scarlet fever in the middle of a western Canadian winter when there hadn't been a previous case in the community and I hadn't been outside of it. My main recollection of this disease is of reading my first full length book, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, while recovering in bed. My only recollection of diphtheria is that when we were lined up in the hallway at school to be vaccinated against it somebody fainted and knocked over the water fountain.

### Obesity

The attitude toward obesity in the 1930s and 1940s was just the opposite of what it is today. The town fat man was regarded as being in excellent health because he had a reserve of energy that he could call on to ward off infections and other threats to his well-being. Most of the genial figures in our popular folklore are obese and most unpleasant characters are thin. Santa Claus and Falstaff are depicted as jolly fat men. Shakespeare's Julius Caesar said "Let me have men about me that are fat." When I cast doubt on the benefits of fatness in my grade seven health science course my plump female teacher reminded me of the maxim "laugh and grow fat."

This perception was still in vogue when I attended university. The professor my class selected as their favorite teacher was a scholarly, articulate man who abandoned his specialty during his last lecture each year and devoted it to giving his students the benefit of his long personal experience with life. When it came to the choice of a wife he said he could do no better than to pass on the advice his professor had given his class when he graduated from university in Scotland. It was to "get one that waddles." This recommendation was based on the perception that women who waddled had a happy disposition and an easy childbirth. He said that the next time he saw his professor he was able to assure him that he had.

### School Accidents

The children in my primary school class were made conscious of their own mortality by the sudden death of a classmate. He had been struck on the head with a bat during a softball game. Initially it didn't seem serious, he continued to attend school, and the sudden announcement of his death caused bewilderment and anxiety among his classmates. It was the middle of December and the school Christmas concert that year was cancelled. His death reportedly was due to an "abscess," but whatever the cause was, it seems unlikely that it would have been fatal today.

As in all schools, there were one or two older boys who liked to pick on beginning students. I had few difficulties of this sort, but when I did I found myself being defended by a boy from the secondary room who, for reasons unknown to me except perhaps that we were neighbours, adopted me as his ward. He was a handsome and personable boy and I treasured his mature friendship.

When I went to school one Monday morning I was stunned to learn that he and another boy had been drowned in a weekend boating accident. They had gone as part of a troop on a supervised weekend outing to Lake Four, the nearest sizable body of water. Presumably because she thought I would like to see him for the last time, my mother took me with her when she attended his funeral. It was a mistake. It was an open-casket service and he had lain at the bottom of the lake for several days before his body was recovered. His features were unrecognizable. Although I saw it for only a few seconds, his face in death is still vivid in my memory, whereas I have only a vague recollection of what he looked like in life. The young secondary school teacher who was his troop leader left at the end of the year. On the only occasion I ever saw him again he was seated in the library of United College in Winnipeg where he was enrolled as a student of theology.

### Farm Accidents

Most farm accidents were caused by carelessness, but the diverse skills demanded by farming generated a variety of injuries. The ax wielded by a neighbour's son who was felling trees for winter fuel glanced off a limb and embedded itself in his foot. Our hired man reached for the switch on an engine in the dark and put his hand instead on the flywheel. His palm was laid open down to the tendons but he didn't go to the doctor because he didn't have the money. Falling or being thrown off horses was a cause of frequent fractures of the collarbone and forearm among boys and being kicked or stepped on by horses and cows of contusions of the legs and feet. Some injuries to boys were the result of successfully persuading their fathers to let them handle farm machinery before they had the skill and experience to do so safely.

We had a neighbour who compiled an extraordinary record of unlikely accidents. He walked with a limp that reminded everybody of his propensity for self injury. One day in haying season as he was working on the cutting bar of his mower from the front (instead of the back) his horses bolted, severing the tendon in the back of one ankle. On another occasion he fell off the windmill on top of his barn (the largest in the district), rolled down the hip roof and landed in a load of hay he had left there the day before with no such purpose in mind. He also had the misfortune to be crossing the railroad track that ran through his farm when his car was struck by the local train, which ran only at noon on Tuesdays and Fridays, sounded its whistle at every crossing and never exceeded thirty-five miles an hour.

Just visiting his farm entailed a risk of injury. I was standing in his farmyard one evening with some other boys while he explained the finer points of Clydesdale horses (which he raised and exhibited) when one of them reached out and grabbed my upper arm in his teeth. It was black and blue for weeks. He scorned medical attention for all but the most serious of ailments. One day as he was supervising the threshing operation he suddenly said "I can't put up with this," went to the tractor, removed a pair of pliers from the tool box, shoved them into his mouth and brought out a tooth that apparently had been bothering him for some time. How he knew that he had the right tooth (or if, in fact, he did) is hard to say, but in any event he stopped complaining about it.

My closest encounter with serious injury occurred when I was working over the summer for a district farmer. I was driving his old 1928 Case tractor when the seat suddenly broke off, sending me earthward in front of the heavy one-way disc I was pulling. I instinctively threw out my arm as I fell and my hand landed on the steering wheel, enabling me to pull myself back onto the tractor. There were some ugly injuries to boys caused by one-way discs.

Boys also incurred injuries as the result of doing something, as they said, "just for the hell of it." One afternoon I walked into the barn after school to find that the only other occupant was the bull, which as usual was standing in his stall either asleep or in a state of semiconsciousness. I reached through a gap between the planks in the wall of his stall and slapped him on his hind foot. His reaction was instantaneous. He lashed out with such force that he injured his foot when it hit the wall and he limped around the farmyard for the next couple of weeks. My father couldn't figure out how he could injure himself by just standing in his stall. Fortunately, there were no cows that required his services at the time. I felt sorry for him, but I was more concerned with what could have happened to my hand if it had been caught between the wall and his foot.

### Hunting Accidents

Rifles and shotguns in the hands of boys obviously posed some risk of injury to themselves and others, but nothing on the scale of the mayhem caused nowadays by their use of handguns. My only recollection of a hunting accident is attributable to my own involvement in it. It happened one Saturday afternoon in the fall when a neighbour's son, a town boy who was visiting him and I went hunting sharp-tailed grouse. I was fifteen, my friend was sixteen and the other boy was twelve. My friend and I were equipped with shotguns and the younger boy with my .22 caliber rifle. We successfully stalked a flock of grouse feeding in a field and in the ensuing shoot I felled one of them with my shotgun. When grouse take flight at feeding time they usually fly about half a mile and settle down to feed again. I instructed the boy to finish off the bird I had wounded and ran toward the top of a nearby hill to see where the flock had gone.

There was the sound of yelling and screaming. It turned out that the boy had cocked his rifle and was planning to shoot at a bird on the ground (the only feasible shot with a rifle) but had failed to get off the shot. When I told him to finish off the wounded bird he grasped the rifle by the end of the barrel and swung it in a semicircle, striking the bird with the butt. The impact caused the rifle to fire, sending a bullet through the back of both of his thighs and grazing his scrotum.

His cries attracted the attention of two nearby hunters who had a car. We put him in the back seat and drove as fast as possible to Kenton, where I knocked on the door of his house and told his mother her son had been shot. Her hysteria subsided somewhat when she saw him walking up the drive, assisted on either side by the two hunters. The doctor determined that he had suffered two clean wounds to the back of his thighs and that the wound in between was not debilitating. After a week he was back in school. For me this episode conveyed a clear message: never lend your rifle to a town kid.

Grouse and pheasants have the same problem with night vision that domestic chickens have. An elderly acquaintance went walking his two dogs along a country road one summer evening and failed to return. He was found lying unconscious in the ditch with a dead pheasant beside him. He had a fractured skull and was hospitalized for a month. It was concluded that he had been hit in the head by a low-flying pheasant. It was difficult to tell whether he suffered any permanent damage because there had been some uncertainty about his mental competence before it happened.

## Crime and Community

There was no crime in the Lenore community that could be classified as anything more than a minor misdemeanor. A boy who grew up in town and moved to Winnipeg was reported to have been incarcerated for burglary, but that was attributed to the influence of the big city and was not talked about out of consideration for his family. The only case of mayhem in the district involved the demented adult son of a farmer in the Kenton area who got up in the middle of the night, went to a neighbour's house that was occupied by an elderly couple and murdered them both in their bed with a shotgun. There were no lurid accounts of this crime in the newspapers, only a short item that identified the principals and where and when it happened. It was considered too personal and shameful to be talked about in the community and my only knowledge of it came from whispered conversations with my peers on the school van. But that was before the days of *The National Inquirer*.

To my knowledge we never owned a key to the door of any of the four houses in which we lived. Like other farmers, we left the front door unlocked while we were away in winter in case somebody got stranded in a snowstorm and needed shelter. Nobody expected any thanks for this courtesy and nobody thought of offering any. It was simply a part of the social genre of the community.

I was reminded of those times some forty years later when (through another "curious set of circumstances") I was involved in a research project on the nutritional health of the rural black residents of Holmes County, Mississippi. According to the previous census, it was the second poorest county in the United States. One of the black residents turned her house over to our team of about ten workers for the duration of the one-week project. When I prepared to leave the house to go to the health clinic on the first morning I couldn't find a key to lock the door of her house while we were away. I went to get one from her at the neighbour's house where she was staying only to find that she didn't have a key to her house, nor did any of the other residents of the neighbourhood to theirs. They all knew one another and looked after one another's houses, belongings and children. A stranger in the neighbourhood was immediately recognized and kept under observation.

Poverty had not produced crime in that impoverished rural community any more than it had in the rural communities of Manitoba during the Depression. It isn't poverty or race that is responsible for the high crime rate in urban communities today, but loss of the social fabric that once bound families and neighbourhoods together. When I ask myself why I didn't engage in the kind of crime that is now prevalent in many urban communities, the answer I get is that it would have disgraced my family in the eyes of the community.

There is no better place to find evidence of this than in New York City. After a long walk in Central Park one morning I went into a delicatessen in Manhattan to relieve my hunger. The customers lined up along a sandwich bar and gave their orders to a woman who worked behind it. When it came my turn she asked me what kind of bread I wanted, what spread I wanted on it and what I wanted in the middle. I gave her this information, she made my sandwich, put it on top of the bar and addressed the same questions to the next customer. I watched her constantly throughout this process and she didn't look up from the counter, never saw me, couldn't have testified whether I was white, black, blind or had two heads, and she didn't care.

# Chapter 11

## *Pueritia Terminalis*

### Leaving Lenore

In the fall of 1941 the Department of Education of the Government of Manitoba notified me that I had been awarded a scholarship to attend the University of Manitoba. Before I left home my mother gave me a new suede leather jacket and a lot of advice about the temptations of the city. I never found out where she got either the money to buy the jacket or the information about the temptations. As I looked at the town through the rear window of the car that took me to Virden to catch the train to Winnipeg, I realized that it was the end of boyhood.

It was my first trip to a big city. After getting off the train at the Canadian Pacific Railway station in Winnipeg (then attached to the Alexandra Hotel) I went outside where I saw a sign that read Main Street. I recognized the clattering contraptions rolling along the street as street cars and hopped onto the rear platform of one of them the way I had seen people do it in the movies. I had no idea where the streetcar was taking me but after a while I recognized the Legislative Buildings through the window and recalled that the notice about my scholarship had included an invitation to visit the Department of Education on my arrival. I got off, went inside, found the department and asked the staff a lot of questions, such as how to get to the university, where I could get a place to live and where was a good place to eat. They provided me with a lot of valuable information and I wound up in a boarding house on River Avenue. It was inhabited mostly by students and was close to Osborne Street where a streetcar ran on the route to the university.

By the time the notice of my scholarship arrived and I could get to the university it was already a week into the fall term. There were no counselors to ease the entry of new students into the university in those days and it was another two weeks before I discovered that the reason I was having trouble with organic chemistry was that it was a course for second-year students. After getting that and a few other problems straightened out, my career as a university student went fairly smoothly and my association with universities has continued in one form or another ever since.

# Chapter 12

## *Epilogue*

### A Semicentennial Return Visit

In August of 1991 I drove my ancient Volvo station wagon up the road that led to our first farmstead and stopped at the entrance to the yard. From that vantage point things hadn't changed much from the way they were when I left in the summer of 1929. The shape of the slough was different and there were no longer any willows along its edge, but there were still some box elders growing on the east side of the yard and some vestiges of the lilacs that grew on the south.

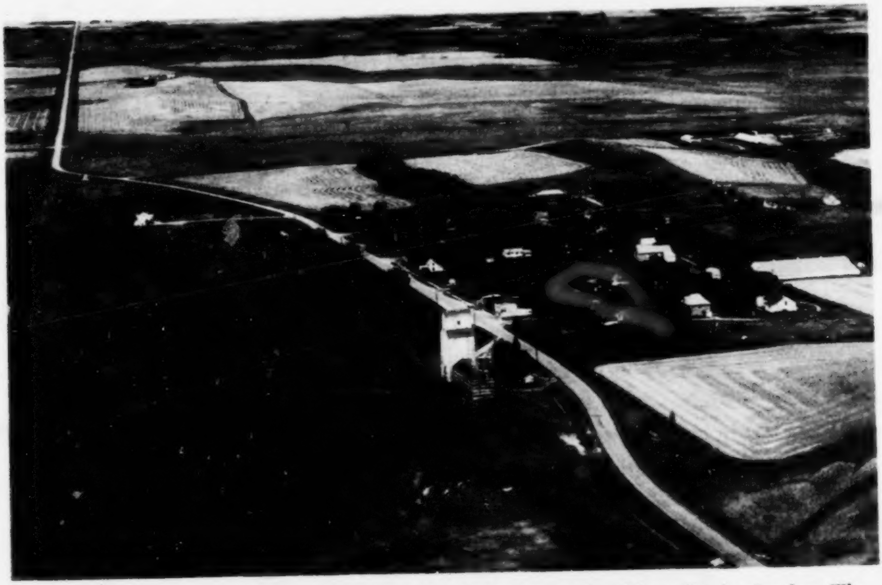
Inside the yard things were quite different. There was a complete silence except for the occasional buzzing of flying insects in the hot summer air. The stable was gone and the house stood deathlike and deserted. When I approached it I found myself walking slowly and carefully, trying not to break the silence, as one does in a funeral parlour (which in a sense it was). The house looked familiar from the front but the verandah on the back was gone, its previous presence verified by a section of the wall that was less weathered than the rest. I continued around to the back and looked through a crack in the boards over the window of the bedroom in which I was born. It was full of oats. The house had become a granary.

The big red barn and the granary that overlooked the pond on our second farmstead had disappeared. There was still no windbreak around the house and it looked bleaker than ever. Notwithstanding, it was the only one of the four houses I had lived in that was still inhabited.

I approached our third farmstead by the road that ran past the field the gophers had kept green all summer in 1937 and the hail had devastated in the fall of 1938. It had a familiar appearance. The current owner happened by and said that it had been hit by a hailstorm the previous week. The large stone house was a hollow shell, the barn had caved in and the implement shed had disappeared. The eight hundred acres of land had become part of an even larger farm. Everything about the farm had changed in the fifty-four years since I left it except its vulnerability to hail.

Our house in Lenore had been used to launch several unsuccessful

*Relics of harvests past (1991).*
*This is the barn the author's neighbour fell off into a load of hay.*



*Aerial view of Lenore as it appeared on the 1993 Manitoba Wheat Pool calendar. The large building on the right is the curling rink, the building to its left is the Odd Fellows Hall, the farm in the upper right is where the author and his friends got the chickens on Halloween night and the family's second farmstead is in the distance.*

enterprises and was finally boarded up. The same fate had befallen most of the commercial buildings in town. The two elevators and grocery stores had been abandoned and the railroad station, post office, school and garage closed down.

On the way back to Lenore I passed the relic of the threshing machine I had worked on as a teenager. It was parked beside the barn that our neighbour had fallen off into a load of hay. The windmill was gone and the barn was abandoned. The bricks had been removed from Lenore school, leaving it looking like a lady shorn of her outer clothing and left standing beside the street. A drive down the main street failed to reveal a single human being or stray dog.

*The author's father at about the age of eighty.*

Improvements in transportation after World War II left Lenore and many other small towns in Manitoba on a deadend road. Grain was hauled out by truck, mail delivered by van and children transported to regional schools by bus. The farmers and their families drove to the supermarkets in larger centres to do their shopping. An unofficial census of the population of Lenore taken at a reunion in the summer of 1980 recorded 143 residents. My cousin, who was tired of taking in stray cats, took a census of the cats in town that indicated that there were nine cats left; eight of them were spayed.

Notwithstanding, Lenore looks pretty good in an aerial view of the town and its environs featured in the 1993 Manitoba Wheat Pool calendar. On a visit to Lenore in the summer of 1995 I found evidence of community pride in the neatly trimmed lawns and the absence of debris on vacant lots. It brought to mind the title of Muriel Beadle's book about the estate houses in England abandoned by their owners after World War II, *These Ruins Are Inhabited*.

My parents lived in peace and relative comfort in Lenore until my mother's rheumatoid arthritis became so severe that she had to be moved to the hospital in Brandon. She died in 1945 at the age of sixty-seven. My father entered a residence for the elderly in Winnipeg where he was well cared for and remained in good health until his death of a heart attack in 1960 at ninety years of age.

Not long before my father died I picked him up in my car in Winnipeg and took him on a return visit to Lenore. As we approached Portage La Prairie he said "Well, Harold, let's stop and have a smoke or a drink or something." I knew he no longer smoked his pipe so his preference was obvious. He slaked the taste for a glass of ale that he had nurtured since his days in England. We toured all our old haunts in Lenore but the town wasn't the same. Thomas Wolf spoke for both of us in the title of his book, *You Can't Go Home Again*. It was the last time I saw him.

My oldest brother died of a heart attack in 1970 at the age of sixty-nine, my sister from complications of rheumatoid arthritis in 1972 at the same age, and my other brother of respiratory disease in 1991 at age seventy-five. My parents and brothers are buried in Manitoba (where I plan to join them), my sister in British Columbia and a full set of grandparents and great-grandparents in the churchyard at Sherfield-on-Loddon, Hampshire, England.

*Growing Up in Manitoba* consists of recollections of life in a rural Manitoba community in the 1930s from the viewpoint of a boy who grew up during the period as a member of an English farm family. Rural children were often only distantly aware of the economic trauma their parents faced because of the Depression, and, instead, remember the 1930s as a time when they had an abundance of home-grown food, an array of farm animals as pets, and a vast countryside over which they could pursue their interest in the natural environment. The book also describes the difficulty that British immigrant farmers had in adapting to the requirements for successful farming on the Canadian plains, the economic insecurity of tenant farming, and the contributions these immigrants made to the education system in their new home. Those interested in the period of the Great Depression and in the history of rural Western Canada will enjoy the mixture of social history and family history in *Growing Up in Manitoba*.

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